Victim movements

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Over the last three decades, "victims" have become in most Western democracies one of the central figures in the field of social movements. While, in order to make their voices heard, increasing numbers of activist groups claim to be "victims," the number of books and articles which either celebrate or denounce the advent of a "nation of victims" has been growing. Yet few sociological studies have taken the political uses of this category seriously. After briefly tracing the genealogy of victim movements, I will then identify the originality of this new contentious repertoire. Then, I will show how the study of this emerging form of protest has shed light on three blind spots of the sociology of collective action: the emotions of protest, the role of the traumatic event in the activist recruitment, and the gendered dimensions of social movements.

THE GENESIS OF THE "VICTIM MOVEMENT"

Since the mid-1970s, the identification of "victims" as a population with specific characteristics and problems has developed in Europe and the US along with an *administrative, social*, and *academic* mobilization. Launched by various governments, the "victim" category has been adopted by social movements and integrated into scientific knowledge.

Interest in "victims" first arose from a bureaucratic concern for the crime issue. While in the late 1970s the problem of crime control competed with social-economic issues at the top of the political agenda, governments sought to promote victim assistance and compensation programs. The influences behind these policies are quite varied. In the US, these initiatives were inspired by the law-and-order campaign as they primarily aimed at encouraging victims and witnesses of crimes to cooperate with law enforcement authorities so as to reduce crime. In France and Canada, victim assistance was rather a symbolic counterpart to a penal policy aimed at the rehabilitation of offenders. Victim relief should help defuse the "fear of crime" and promote social acceptance of measures for offender reintegration. In both cases, these policies led to the institutionalization of the administrative category of "victims." Symbolic measures focused public attention on victim-related issues such as the proclamation of the National Crime Victims Rights Week by Ronald Reagan (1981) or the convening of committees in charge of stimulating victim reforms (the Task Force on Victims of Crime in the US and the Milliez Commission in France). National organizations were also created to coordinate the implementation of grassroots victim assistance programs run by volunteers: the National Organization for Victim Assistance in the US (1979), Victim Support in Britain (1979), the Institut National d'Aide aux Victimes in France (1986). Finally, the "victims" category has received institutional consecration with the founding of the Office for Victims of Crimes in the US Department of Justice (1984) and, more recently, with the launching in France of the first department entirely devoted to victims' rights (2004).

This unprecedented public concern subsequently encountered the nascent victim activism. The first victims' groups were created in the late 1970s in the US (Parents of Murdered Children in 1978, Protect the Innocent in 1979, Mothers Against Drunk Driving in 1980) and Canada (Citizens United for Safety and Justice in 1981, Victims of Violence in 1984). However, the relationship between the mobilization of victims and the state varies depending on national configurations. Thus, in the US, there is a strong convergence

The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements,
Edited by David A. Snow, Donatella della Porta, Bert Klandermans, and Doug McAdam.

DOI: 10.1002/9781405198431.wbespm415

between public assistance programs looking for legitimization and protest entrepreneurs looking for institutional support (Elias 1993; Weed 1995). Victim activists work closely together with officials in charge of public policies: each identify themselves with the same category of "victim movement" and they conduct joint campaigns for constitutional amendments for victim rights. In Canada, officials of the ministry in charge of victim issues have faced difficulties in co-opting activist networks that do not describe themselves with this label and they have failed to generate a belief in the existence of a "social demand of victims" (Rock 1986). Finally, in France and the UK, victim assistance leaders, who have mostly come from the movements for prisoner rehabilitation, refuse to play the role of spokesperson for the "victims" and explicitly reject the characterization of "victim movement." They derogatorily call self-help groups "angry victims" and suspect them of being driven by irrational reactions, vengeful aims, and punitive spirit. In both countries, it was not until the late 1990s that victims' organizations were recognized by government officials as legitimate representatives (Rock 1998).

An academic field – victimology – has played a role in the reification and institutionalization of the "victims" category. Following the First International Symposium on Victimology, held in 1973, scholars, policymakers, and victim advocate group leaders founded the World Society of Victimology (1979). This scientific society functions as a transnational pressure group, coordinating a lobbying campaign at the United Nations that led to the vote for the "Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crimes and Abuse of Power" in 1985. But above all, this academic movement for victims has helped forge and circulate encompassing concepts defining the "victims" category as a homogeneous entity. Thus, the "discovery" of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in 1980 led to the identification of a psychiatric syndrome supposedly shared by victims of crime, natural disaster, or road crash. Now all victims, regardless of their origin, receive the same treatment and care.

WHAT IS A "VICTIM"? THE LABELING PROCESS AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE "VICTIM" ROLE

In some countries, like the US, the expression "victim movement" is now commonly used and refers to a coalition of well-defined self-help groups, lawyers, and victim assistance professionals who campaign for the recognition of victims' rights. In other countries, the term is not a stable reference, so it may be risky to give a sociological definition to a victims' mobilization. Indeed, an overly broad view of this term leads to including eclectic social movements which do not necessarily have common characteristics. Today, almost all collective action requires the identification of a group defined as a victim (of injustice or inequality) and the public display of suffering persons is one of the strategies commonly used by many protest movements, such as feminist mobilizations and those of the unemployed, AIDS activists, or undocumented immigrants. Therefore, what sociological characteristics specifically distinguish victim mobilizations from more conventional social movements?

Victim movements might first be defined in a tautological sense in that they consist primarily of "victims" and that these "victims" lead the movement. The direct commitment of individuals facing a dramatic event is the first criterion of differentiation that allows us to distinguish victims' organizations from other forms of assembly such as trade unions, humanitarian agencies, or charities. For example, the main French group of victims of terrorism chose a slogan – "created by victims for victims" – which clearly differentiates it from victim assistance networks involving legal experts and psychologists.

But having been the victim of a tragic event is not in itself an objective property. It is rather the result of a social process of labeling. In some cases such as aviation or road accidents,

the relatives of deceased persons rather than the survivors are socially designated as victims. In contrast, in France, associations of terrorism victims are usually run by the survivors of terrorist attacks while the bereaved families occupy a secondary role in the mobilization. The designation as "victim" is the result of a hierarchy within the victims' organizations.

Moreover, the term "victim" is not always claimed by individuals who have had a personal tragedy. The word still has a negative connotation among social movements because it is associated with passivity or helplessness. Thus, feminist movements against domestic violence or child abuse prefer the label of "survivor" which implies agency (Dunn 2005). The leaders of the first French association of struggle against HIV refuse the characterization of "AIDS victims" and call their members "sick social reformers" or "citizen experts." In South America, the associations of parents of disappeared persons replace "victim" with the term of "fighter" or "hero" or "resistant" which more correctly corresponds to the political nature of their struggle. To understand the endorsement or rejection of victim status, it is thus necessary to analyze the construction of collective identity by activist groups.

Finally, not all dramatic events necessarily give rise to the public designation of victims. For example, work accidents have historically been seen as victimless crimes, a fatality, or a socially acceptable risk. Therefore, without the resources needed to engage in lawsuits, workers who have had work accidents struggle to perceive themselves, to mobilize, and to be recognized as victims.

A NEW CONTENTIOUS REPERTOIRE?

Rather than trying to define who is and who is not a "victim," it is in fact more important to observe what constitutes the specificity of the protest activities subsumed under the label of "victim movements." To this end, we will define as a *victim repertoire* a new register of collective action characterized by four properties:

1. This repertoire presupposes the use of a limited range of self-designation, all of which refer to a position in a tragedy: "victims," "bereaved families," "survivors," etc.
2. This register is then characterized by a particular emotional tone. Victimhood entrepreneurs often portray a range of public emotions – pain, grief and suffering – which, unlike anger or pride, are usually considered outside the realm of political struggle.
3. This repertoire is also defined by a special form of organization – the victims' association – led by actors whose public legitimacy is based on their direct victimization experience.
4. Victim groups rely primarily but not exclusively, on four modes of protest. First they employ individual public testimony (press releases, participation in talk shows, autobiographical publications) as a way of publicizing their grievances. They then use lawsuits to obtain compensation and the conviction of those responsible for their suffering or to transform their trials into a court of public opinion. In addition, these organizations frequently mobilize therapeutic practices and medical language, either to strengthen ties within the group (support group) or to authenticate their damages and legitimize the merits of their complaints (public use of diagnosis categories such as PTSD) (Latté & Rechtman 2006). Finally, they regularly organize commemorative events (silent marches, public funerals, memorial services, and vigils) to get a hearing for their case and get media attention. Thus, victims' organizations have specific strategies that are usually associated with the treatment of individual misfortune rather than with collective action.

This victim repertoire is currently spreading far beyond the limited framework of the victim movement. It tends to become a *master frame* invested by eclectic fractions of social

movements. For example, antipsychiatry movements in Britain, which previously were based on class struggle rhetoric and trade union models, have, since the 1980s, adopted the style of victimhood protests by creating associations of survivors (Survivors Speak Out), organizing support groups and public commemorations (Crossley 2006). Similarly, since the 1980s, part of the American feminist movement has left the field of political action to engage in self-help groups of survivors of patriarchal violence (Whittier 2009). More recently, labor unions have also converted to the victim repertoire by attempting, for example, to mobilize the victims of harassment at work or asbestos victims. The success of this contentious repertoire should probably be related to broader trends: the growing importance of media constraints on social movements, the judicialization of collective action and the depoliticization of protest activity. However, more detailed studies could help identify which contexts and actors promote or prevent the introduction of this register into the various sectors of protest activity.

VICTIM ACTIVISM: A "NEW EMOTIONAL MOVEMENT"?

The development of victim activism provided an opportunity to reopen several fields of research on social movements, the first of which is the study of the role of emotions in collective action. Walgrave and Verlhust thus propose to add a new case in the typology of social movements to designate certain mobilizations of victims: the Movement against Senseless Violence in The Netherlands or the Belgian White Movement against pedophilia, for instance (Walgrave & Verlhust 2006). These authors characterize these demonstrations as "new emotional movements" (NEM) for which they consider the affective variables predominant in participation. These NEM indeed contradict some of the results of resource mobilization theory. First, no traditional protest organizations (trade unions or political parties) take part in the mobilization process. Moreover, usual social networks (friendship, church, or professional circles) remain largely inactive in activist recruitment. Finally, protest actions are organized only by small, loosely structured groups often led by inexperienced activists. Similarly, contrary to the principles of framing analysis, these victim mobilizations do not rely on the classical frames of collective action. They do not refer to major transformative ideologies and their claims are usually imprecise and weakly formalized. Finally, none of the sociodemographic variables – age, educational level, and income – seems to predict the recruitment of these movements. The authors conclude that the logic of adherence to these movements is mainly emotional: the grief, compassion, fear, or identification with the figure of the victim outweigh the absence of organizational support and social predisposition to a political commitment.

However, identifying victim movements with NEM presents a number of difficulties. First, the lack of socioeconomic data concerning the mobilization of victims makes it difficult to test the generalized hypothesis that the weight of the social determinants of activist participation fades as an emotional logic becomes dominant. Some empirical studies even tend to invalidate this. Thus, during the mobilization of the victims of industrial disasters (Latté 2009) or road fatalities, cultural capital, economic resources, and activist know-how appear essential to explain why some victims join support groups and why others remain apathetic. These organizations "tend to be run by activists who have been victimized rather than victims who have become activists" (Weed 1990: 469).

Moreover, even in the most dramatic circumstances, material benefits and economic incentives are not necessarily absent. Indeed, victim organizations form loose collectives that cannot rely on community pressure to encourage their members to participate. Creating financial incentives for mobilization (around issues of pecuniary

compensation, in particular) therefore contributes to strengthening an emotional tie which otherwise remains vague.

Finally, the "emotionality" attributed to victim activism should not be viewed as an inherent property of this type of movement, but as a "folk construct" (Groves 2001). Thus, the attribution of emotions is a common form of disqualification, in both the public as well as the judicial arena. Victim groups are thus stigmatized as "irrational" movements based on a sense of mourning, a desire for revenge, or a traumatic shock rather than reasoned claims. This is why many victim spokespersons try to repress the public expression of their emotions (Whittier 2001) while others explicitly reject the emotional dimension of their protest. As a recent press release issued by a French association of disaster victims put it: "We are not part of an emotional demonstration; we refuse to be confined to that role" (Latté 2008: 692, 2009).

A fruitful direction is to leave aside the study of mobilizing emotions and to emphasize the analysis of mobilized emotions. The victim movements are perhaps distinctive less because of their ("emotional") motives than because of the affective role they play in public and the emotional work to which they are obligated by the cultural expectations attached to the social victim's role (Stanbridge & Kenney 2009).

ARE VICTIMS MOBILIZED "ACCIDENTALLY"?

In line with this reflection on emotions in protest activities, victim activism also offers the opportunity to clarify the role played by sudden events in collective action. For 30 years, social movement scholars have made efforts to identify the effects of dramatic events on mobilization processes. The concepts of "suddenly imposed grievances" (Walsh 1981), "moral shock" (Jasper 1997), and "quotidian disruption" (Snow et al. 1998) aim at highlighting the catalytic effect of certain events on the onset of collective action. These tools have been forged in part from case studies of victim movements (the protest of residents from the area of the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant, in particular). In fact, these collective actions arise chronologically subsequent to a brutal event that disrupts the routines of ordinary life. Moreover, the self-presentation of these movements is built on the dramatization of an accident solidarity that binds individuals who did not know each other prior to the accident and who only share the traumatic experience. Thus, Lemieux and Vilain characterize victim organizations as "circumstantial groups," that is, as organizations which, unlike ordinary social movements, are not based on "a priori solidarity" (friendship networks, family ties, political affinities, social proximity), but on "a posteriori solidarity" (the fact of having been together at the "wrong place at the wrong time") (Vilain & Lemieux 1998).

The role of the event in the process of mobilization cannot, however, be overestimated. The event effectively functions as a screen that sometimes obscures the fact that many victim groups are in fact based on deeply rooted social identities and preexisting organizational networks. For example, in France, the associations of cult victims are based on the religious affinities of their members while the movement of Polynesian nuclear test victims finds its support in the networks of the Protestant church and the Independence Party. The groups of asbestos victims are based on the labor unions, and the mobilization of "Gulf War syndrome" victims on the solidarity of veterans. From this point of view, the victims are not only captives of the event, but they take hold of the event as an opportunity for collective action. The event reorients activist commitments, but it does not create them.

DO VICTIMS HAVE A GENDER?

The analysis of the gendered dimensions of victim activism is a final field which deserves to be opened. Compared to most social movements, victim organizations have atypical patterns of gender composition. These are

most often mixed movements not directly focused on gender-related issues. However, the visibility of women in victim activism contrasts with the often-noted invisibility of women activists in the area of social movements. The cause of victims has historically been championed by spokeswomen: Candy Lightner, the founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, or Françoise Rudetzki, the leader of SOS-Terrorism in France. Quantitative studies also reveal an overrepresentation of women in the membership of such organizations (Weed 1990). Moreover, the names of some of these movements are explicitly related to collective identities linked to motherhood or wifehood: Mothers Against Drunk Driving, Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the "crazy women of Algiers" (a movement against forced disappearances) or the "asbestos widows" in France. Finally, victim groups frequently face disqualification full of gendered meanings. For example, media representations of the "victim" are based on the stereotype of the "weeping woman": "the quintessential disaster victim is emotional, beleaguered, overwhelmed, passive – in a word, female" (Enarson & Meyreles 2004). Similarly, critics of the development of victim movements denounce this activism as a "personal" (rather than "political") commitment, as a claim for a "passive" status (rather than an "active" citizenship), as a "private" (rather than as a public) problem, as an "emotional" reaction (rather than as a "rational" position). In short, victims' characteristics are routinely related to properties culturally associated with femininity. Therefore victim activism is a particularly promising field to explore how these gendered meanings are used by activists and their opponents to classify and prioritize social movements.

SEE ALSO: AIDS activism; Collective memory and social movements; Emotion and social movements; Emotion work; Gender and social movements; Grievances, individual and mobilizing; Master frame; Moral shocks/outrage; Motivation and types of motives (instrumental, identity, ideological motives); Participation in social movements; Politics of grief and grieving "mothers" movements; Precipitating events and flashpoints; Quotidian disruption; Repertoires of contention; Resource mobilization theory; Self-help movements.

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