"Why do we blame survivors?"

Chaumont, Jean-Michel

Document type: Contribution à ouvrage collectif (Book Chapter)

Référence bibliographique

Abstract (in French)

Ce texte présente plusieurs hypothèses relatives aux origines antiques de la réaction sociale qui afflige certaines catégories de rescapés d'événements traumatisques, les « survivants suspects ». Les combattants défaits en seraient la figure originelle et les femmes violées le double symétrique. La persistance de la réaction suspicieuse est illustrée par la stigmatisation posthume endurée par les masses juives assassinées et les Muselmänner dans les camps nazis. En conclusion, les évolutions intervenues depuis peu dans ces réactions sociales sont mises en lien avec l'avènement de sociétés de plus en plus individualistes.

Introduction

I am researching the distant, classical and perhaps even older origins of what has come to be known as the "blaming the victim" syndrome (Ryan 1997), i.e. the social reaction of putting a certain amount of the responsibility for what has happened to the victim back onto this very victim; at the very least, the fact of not having put up enough resistance. This “secondary victimisation” is considered to be a determining factor in the onset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders and is therefore seen as a particularly harmful and misplaced social judgement (Herman 1992: 115-117).

Two hypotheses justify the endeavour of researching its origins back over a very long time period. First hypothesis: this reaction was originally directed toward a heterogeneous group of people I call the “dubious survivors”. This group is defined by two characteristics: firstly, they endure an experience and secondly, a reaction of suspicion. However, it is neither an ordinary experience, nor just any form of suspicion. The experience is inflicted upon them, i.e. they find themselves in this situation against their own free will and without any means of escape. They are totally constrained. Furthermore, the ordeal seriously affects the physical integrity of these individuals. If they survive the ordeal, the suspicion held against them

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1 This chapter was translated from French by Ronan Healy.
2 The person may not necessarily have been forced to take part, but if he or she had not done so voluntarily, then he or she would have been forced to endure it.
retrospectively is one of having sacrificed a greater good for the sake of a survival that has become shameful and derogatory.

Second hypothesis: the archetypal model of the dubious survivor would be the warrior who remains alive after his side’s defeat. He is, by definition, suspected of having surrendered through cowardice, preferring to save his skin rather than risk his life in the way his duty as a soldier forces him to. He did not die resisting, clinging on to his weapon. Perhaps he surrendered while the tide of the battle could still have been turned. Perhaps he may have agreed with, secretly applauded even, the enemy’s victory, thus committing the supreme crime of high treason.

Defeated warriors and raped women

Texts from classical antiquity are full of examples of prisoners who are put to death or banished for having allowed themselves to be captured instead of dying whilst clinging on tightly to their arms. Flavius Josephus recounts the example of a Roman horseman who, having been taken prisoner by the Jews, manages to escape just as he is about to be executed and returns to his camp. In *The Jewish War* it is reported that Titus “could not endure to put him to death; but deeming him unworthy of being a Roman soldier, who could allow himself to be taken alive, he stripped him of his arms, and dismissed him from the legion; a punishment, to one accessible to shame, severer even than death.” (Josephus 1858: 480). In the case of this poor horseman, the very fact of having survived is seen as proof enough of a servile attachment to life which justifies all manner of degradation: from execution – to which Titus, out of humanity, could not resort – to being banished from his own camp; from being put to death to being reduced to slavery with the enemy. The same Flavius Josephus indicates the correct line of behaviour to follow in order to avoid dishonour: voluntary death, as the last resort always available to a man of honour.

This is the case for the exhortation of suicide that Eleazar makes to the besieged people of Masada (Josephus 1858: 520):

As we have of old determined, my brave comrades, neither to serve the Romans, nor any other than God, […] the time has now come which enjoins us to verify by our actions this resolve. Herein then, let us not disgrace ourselves; we who have hitherto refused to submit even to an unendangered servitude, but who now, along with servitude, shall have to undergo intolerable punishment, if we shall fall alive into the hands of the Romans: […] I think, moreover, that this hath been granted to us as a favor by God, that we have it in our power to die honorably and in freedom; a privilege which has not fallen to the lot of others, who have been defeated contrary to their expectations. Let another day dawn, and assured
capture awaits us; but there is still the unfettered choice of a noble death with those dearest to us. For this our enemies are unable to prevent [...] while for us to conquer them in battle is no longer possible.

Immediate voluntary death provides proof of the sincerity of their commitment and refutes beforehand any suspicion of a lack of genuine commitment.\textsuperscript{3} It should be noted that in performing seppuku, a defeated Samurai also seems to provide deferred proof of the fact that his defeat had not been due to cowardice (Pinguet 1993). This last example also shows that this type of social reaction is not only present in Western traditions but could well be part of a far more widespread anthropological phenomenon.

Let us now focus for a moment on the case of Lucretia as reported by Livy in the first book of his History of Rome. The story is supposedly set in 509 BC. A Roman army is besieging Ardea, which is located a few hours away from Rome. The siege has been lasting a long time and the officers are getting bored. They start drinking and vaunting the virtue of their wives. They decide to go and verify this with their own eyes, and so ride off at speed to Rome. At the court of king Tarquin, the women are behaving dissolutely. At the residence of Collatinus, however, they find Lucretia, a chaste, modest and hard working wife. Sextus, the son of king Tarquin, becomes infatuated with her. A few days later, the prince returns, alone. He is received as a friend and a guest of honour. That night, armed with his sword, he enters into Lucretia’s bedroom and rapes her. She would have resisted right to the end had Tarquin not threatened to pretend he had found her in the arms of a servant and had immediately punished them both. Unable to stand the idea of her reputation being tarnished forever, she gives in to the assault. The following day she immediately calls on her father, her husband Collatinus and two of their friends, one of whom is Brutus. She tells them everything and urges them, if they be men, to exact revenge in her name. They swear to do so and try to console her. However, Lucretia is inconsolable and declares theatrically, just before plunging a dagger into her heart, that she is committing suicide so that “from this time forth, no woman who survives this shame will ever dare to evoke the example of Lucretia.” (Titus-Livius date page...)

In doing so, is Lucretia laying the grounds for an enduring sense of stigmatisation to be experienced by future rape survivors who do not choose

\textsuperscript{3} Moreover, in order to make it completely clear to the Romans – and for all posterity – that their suicide was the result of a free choice, Eleazar proposes not to burn their provisions with all the rest: “Our provisions alone let us spare; for these will testify, when we are dead, that we were not subdued from want; but that, as we had resolved from the beginning, we preferred death to servitude.” (Josephus 1858: 521).
death? Just like a Samurai, Lucretia commits suicide *after* having survived. This is a deferred voluntary death with exactly the same aim as the suicide of the besieged people of Masada. It is meant to refute any suspicion of her having put her life before her honour. In the end, she did give in; she gave herself up to Sextus, but neither out of cowardice, nor out of a servile attachment to a life that every soul of decent birth is naturally prepared to sacrifice when honour is at stake. No, the aim was not to compromise a reputation that was under threat. Ceasing to resist and letting herself be invaded *was a ploy*, not to save her life - like those who have the soul of a slave - but rather, a ploy to save her honour. Her voluntary death is aimed at providing rational proof of the fact that her attachment to life was not the motive for her consent. Therefore, her suicide is not the consequence of an indelible blemish, but rather proof of the absence of any such blemish.

If my interpretation is right, it is surprising to note that the same social reaction applies to situations that seem so apparently different. In the case of defeated soldiers, it is easy to understand why they are faced with such ruthless court-martials. During wartime, it is the very survival of the group that is at stake. Therefore, it is no surprise that in such cases, absolute individual sacrifice is expected of everyone. It is perfectly logical that in order to incite each soldier to accomplish his duty, survival due to cowardice is rendered even more costly than death. It is sanctioned by ignominious execution or degradation and social death, all of which are seen as outcomes far worse than a life that is gloriously sacrificed for the group’s survival.

In the case of raped women, however, this ceases to be so easily comprehensible. It is on this issue that the heuristic potential of grouping together different populations of dubious survivors is revealed. The similarity of the normative expectations would seem to support hypotheses about the existence of stakes as large as military defeat, i.e. stakes that include the survival of the groups (tribes, cities, nations, empires, etc.) involved. The continuing insistence on resorting to voluntary death up until quite recently⁵ – despite innumerable doubts about the moral value of

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⁴ In his *Declamatio Lucretiae*, the humanist and chancellor of Florence Coluccio SALUTATI (1331-1406) captures perfectly the point where Lucretia declares: “Unless I kill myself, never will you trust that I preferred to escape infamy than death. Who will ever believe that he terrified me with the killing of the slave and that I feared more the possible disgrace of a slave joined to me than death, unless, by the strength and courage of dying, I will prove it?” (This transcription and translation of Salutati’s *Declamatio Lucretiae* comes from Jed (1989: page???).

⁵ This is how the writer V. DESPENTES (2006: 39) recently wrote about her own rape: “A woman wanting to hold on to her dignity would have preferred to be killed. My survival is, in itself, proof against me.”
Lucretia’s suicide having been raised since Augustine (date; page)⁶ – also seems to suggest the significance of the underlying stakes. If, through the use of arms, men defend the living space of their group against foreign invasion, then women – and legitimate wives in particular – are responsible for the reproduction of the domestic group. If a wife consents to making love with a third party, she is committing adultery and betraying the lineage to which she belongs. She deserves to die. If she is sexually assaulted, whether by another member of the group or by an enemy, she finds herself in the same position as a soldier called upon to choose death over surrender. Livy states clearly that Sextus, who is a member of the same group, behaved just like “enemies in wartime.”⁷ And it is because it was unacceptable for their princes to behave like enemies that Brutus would successfully call on the Roman people to bring about the downfall of the monarchy and the foundation of the republic.

**Derived figures: the victims of the Shoah and the Muselmänner**

Whilst defeated soldiers and raped women appear as paradigmatic dubious-survivor figures, a further hypothesis can nevertheless be put forward for the existence of other derived figures. In certain cases, they can be very close: the Christian penitents of the first centuries were, among others, those who didn’t have the courage to choose death – the martyrs – over abjuration. Of course, by renouncing their faith, they were putting the survival of their religious community at risk. If, once the persecution had ended, they wished to re-join the group, they could only do so on condition of the bishop granting them the status of penitent: covered in ashes, they would put on an ostensible display of detachment from the earthly life that they had not had the courage to sacrifice when their loyalty had been put to the test by the enemies of the Lord.

In other cases, the derived figures could be seen to be (ou simplement “are”) much further removed from the original model. This might lead to quite attenuated, sometimes even completely metaphorical situations, in which the ordeal would not prove to be so constraining, nor be life threatening, in the literal sense of the term. The suspicion could stem from having consented to a less dishonourable act; it could be less explicit and require less demanding proof.

Let us consider all the situations where individuals are stigmatised for having preferred material advantages over solidarity towards the group to

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⁶ *The City of God*, book I.
⁷ TITUS-LIVIUS, *The History of Rome*, *op. cit.*
which they belong. Take, for example, the factory worker who is indignant with regard to the manner in which some of his co-workers are vying for promotion (De Raeve 2006: 37):

Real whores. I’m not joking. Factory-floor whores. Would do anything to get it, some of them. Not an ounce of pride left. Would crawl through mud if that’s what it took. Sell their mother and father, they would. And their co-workers. Would accept anything. Pronouncing around. Pawpaw and treats. All teary-eyed, wagging their tails. So embarrassing and pitiful. Yes-men, just for a promotion. For a few cents an hour. For some status.

Having put forward the possibility of derived figures, it must now be shown that such other cases exist. It seems to me that the Jewish masses deported from the ghettos and assassinated in the extermination camps during the Shoah must be considered. On the face of it, this may seem counterintuitive for at least two reasons: firstly, they didn’t actually survive the ordeal and secondly, it concerns a collective subject: the Jewish masses. And yet, the suspicion, in the toned-down form of what Wellers called, as early as 1949, a “painful surprise,” (Wellers 1949: 14) has haunted Jewish memoirs through the repeated examination of the question of why they didn’t rebel, why, to use the biblical expression, they gave themselves up to death, “like lambs to the slaughter.” Imprisoned inside the ghettos, with no real means of escape and submitted to a regime of terror, they certainly had no hope of regaining their freedom. However, in the tacit reproach found in the why of their “passivity,” there is an echo of Eleazar’s exhortation at Masada: “Let another day dawn, and assured capture awaits us; but there is still the unfettered choice of a noble death with those dearest to us.”

It must be remembered that this is exactly what the Warsaw Ghetto insurgents chose to do. The lucid eyewitness account of Marek Edelman, one of the rare leaders of this uprising to have survived it, is perfectly clear on this point: “There were only two hundred and twenty people left in the Jewish Combat Organization. Could you even call it an uprising? Was it not more about not letting them come and slaughter us? Deep down, it was just about choosing how we would die.” (Edelman & Krall 1983: 74). In choosing voluntary death, they administered the proof required of the dubious survivors and, as a friend of Edelman said, “it’s good, because at least they saved the honour of the Jews.” (Edelman & Krall 1983: 136). Indeed, this fully explains why Jewish memoirs have, for decades, cherished the memory of the insurgents, whilst discreetly eclipsing the behaviour of the anonymous masses, as if these poor unfortunate people were somehow to blame.

Like many others, I have felt indignant in the past at the recognition denied to the vast majority of victims. Surely their behaviour was only too
normal and understandable, considering the situation in which they found themselves (Chaumont 1997: 286). At the time, I had not yet understood that it is precisely in these exceptional situations, when the survival of the group itself is under threat, that supererogatory action becomes the norm and, consequently, the readiness to make the ultimate sacrifice is expected of everyone. No matter how extreme the constraints placed upon them by the enemy are, each person must resist right to the end because it is tacitly assumed that there is quite simply no future for any individuals, should the group cease to exist.

The assassinated Jewish masses were not the only victims of Nazi terror to suffer, posthumously, from the stigmatisation dealt out to the various groups of dubious survivors. Inside the concentration camps, other modes of “capitulation” were looked down upon and sanctioned according to the same criteria. I have in mind here those who were referred to, in the derogatory slang terms of the camps, as Muselmänner. These dubious survivors were seen to have placed their survival, which turned out to be quite provisional, above the superior value of human dignity (Martin-Chauffier 1947: 94):

Nine and a half times out of ten, the attempts to degrade them were successful, reducing men down to an animal state, without them even being able to save themselves through this abandonment. When the last breath left a body too weakened to hold it in, whatever it was that made a man a man had already long deserted that little bundle of bones protruding from under the withered skin, reducing him down to automatic movements and to the most elementary instincts of conservation: fear, cowardice, treachery, theft or the lowest form of humility.

If my hypothesis is correct, it must be concluded that even as late as the 20th century, the behaviour of the Nazi victims was still being judged by the same yardstick of normative expectations applied to warriors more than two millennia earlier.

A social revolution? Stigmatising the stigmatisers

This acknowledgment must not, however, become a stopping point. On the contrary, evolutions on a spectacular - maybe even revolutionary - scale must be set in motion [may be taking place?][may have been left unnoticed?]. After millennia of captured soldiers being abandoned to the mercy of their victors, a progressive state of protection has been granted to them through the efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Although initially reserved for somewhat less dubious soldiers, i.e. those who had been injured on the battlefield, this protection was extended to
prisoners in the annexes of the Hague Convention (1899) before an international convention was specifically dedicated to them for the first time in 1929. With regard to the figure of the prisoner, the prevailing image is now one of a victim, rather than a potential traitor. More recently, thanks largely to the efforts of the feminist movement, the suspicions applied to raped women have been redirected towards the perpetrators and, at least in theory, it is now the stigmatisers who are made to feel guilty. In numerous countries, police officers have been specially trained to learn how to interview rape victims without adding insult to injury. Even when it comes to the victims of the Shoah, numerous authors have explicitly criticised the blame that had been levelled at these victims in past decades concerning their passivity. The dogged will for survival shown by certain concentration camp inmates has at last been put forward as a possible basis for a present-day ethical code directed explicitly against the heroic ethics of ancient times (DesPres 1976).

The radical nature of the sacrifice required in order to guarantee the survival of the group would seem to suggest that the social reaction directed towards the dubious survivors is a phenomenon that is typical of holistic societies, i.e. societies where the law of the whole prevails over the interests of the individual parts. In this hypothesis, the evolution observed could be seen as an indicator of a progressive move towards ever more individualistic societies.

This hypothesis is certainly tempting, but should perhaps not be taken on board too quickly, since certain stubborn facts would seem to suggest that things are not actually quite so straightforward. Women continue to commit suicide after having been raped, former prisoners and others who have survived extreme conditions still choose to exclude themselves from any form of social life (Herman 1992: 50). They sink into despair despite the considerable efforts occasionally put in place to reintegrate these veterans back into normal life. It is quite interesting to note that the episode of Lucretia, when re-examined in the light of “psychotraumatology”, turns suicide into a psychological outcome, a pathological consequence of an endured trauma (Jehel 2009). Therefore, it is no longer the most exemplary women who follow in the footsteps of Lucretia, but rather those whose reason has been cast aside by the traumatism. The meaning given to certain acts has, therefore, been fundamentally transformed and it would be absurd to deny the importance of these intervening changes. Nevertheless, suicides continue to occur despite the supposed revolution. The possibility that these changes are more of a reconstruction of the terms of the equation, rather than a true revolution, cannot therefore be excluded. [delete?: This is a situation that can only really be cleared up through continued empirical research.]
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