

Erica Bouris. *Complex Political Victims*. Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 2007. 256 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56549-232-5.



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If there is anything that trends in contemporary conflict tell us, it is that a critical reexamination and reformulation of the concept of “political victim” is long overdue. Erica Bouris’s *Complex Political Victims* represents a contribution to this otherwise understudied area within human rights scholarship. The prevailing discourse utilized by states and other actors to recognize and respond to political victims is replete with homogenized and simplified dyads that delimit the who, what, why, and how of political victimhood. When combined with other factors, this predilection profoundly affects our thinking about who is a “legitimate” victim and may inhibit effective policy response, both of which can compromise the prospects for sustainable peace in conflict transition settings.

Working within the realms of qualitative discourse analysis and post-structuralist theory, Bouris develops an alternative to the conventional discourse on political victimization that seeks to “disturb those practices that are settled, untie what appears to be sewn up, and render as produced that which claims to be naturally emergent.” (p. 6) She applies her framework across two cases, the plight of Bosnian Muslims during the Yugoslav civil war, and the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Collectively these cases illustrate the partiality of current approaches to peacebuilding (broadly defined) and conflict resolution. Such

approaches strip away vital dimensions of political victimization and distill it into simple, binary relationships that constitute the “ideal” victim, who is typically associated with four characteristics: innocence, purity, lack of responsibility, and moral superiority.

Peace-based approaches and justice-based approaches to peacebuilding, for example, each draw on an “impoverished understanding of the victim” (p. 22). Interest-based approaches to conflict resolution ignore the “victim” and focus instead on combatant groups and power-brokers whose cooperation is central to securing peace agreements. Social psychology-based approaches to conflict resolution, while an improvement on interest-based approaches (its discourse is of mutual victimization), fail to problematize sufficiently the notion of “responsibility” and lack a complex understanding of victim identity *per se*. Finally, rights-based approaches to peacebuilding fall back upon a “given” understanding and image of “victim” (pp. 23-27). The characteristics of the ideal victim thus become instrumental in how each approach functions—but none of these approaches succeeds in developing a “notion of the complexity of the victim identity” (p. 28). Bouris extends this debate by developing a rich narrative that elegantly traces, compares, and contrasts “ideal” and “complex” victim discourses.

In the Bosnian Muslim case, states and other actors

initially relied on “ideal” victim discourse, which prevented the Bosnian Muslims from being recognized by the international community of states as victims. Policy response correlated with this perception—an arms embargo covering both sides of the conflict was implemented, along with diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict. As the war continued this perception shifted, however, as evidence gradually mounted of atrocities perpetrated by Serbs against the Bosnian Muslim population (e.g., Serb-run concentration camps, mass rape of Muslim women). This evidence fit with the discourse of the “ideal” victim, thus rendering Bosnian Muslim as legitimate victims who, by a chain of equivalence, were perceived as “pure,” “innocent,” “not responsible,” and perhaps “morally superior.” Moreover, the perpetuation of the “ideal” victim discourse in the final months of the war became so embedded, especially within U.S. policymaking circles, that Bouris claims (pp. 101-105) it may have led to the covering up of evidence pointing to Bosnian responsibility for the February 1994 and August 1995 Sarajevo marketplace bombings because such evidence would have tainted the “ideal” victim image that had been carefully crafted up until that time. Bouris concludes that the particular brand of victim (and identity) discourse that prevails currently in postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina does not bode well for peace and stability over the medium- or longer-term future, because the population continues to contribute to the “space for political victimization” through constitutional nationalism and support for ethno-religious identity (pp. 107-115).

In the case of South African TRC, Bouris ultimately finds that the TRC was not “wholly uninformed by complex notions of victimization, nor entirely ill prepared to recognize and assist complex political victims” (p. 175). The TRC process, which was “victim-centered,” was flawed because with few exceptions (see pp. 147-148) it was shaped around the image of the “ideal” victim, including ways in which race and political affiliation were “contested parameters” in defining victims (p. 143). The TRC’s juridical-positivist procedures (protocols for collecting testimony and litmus tests for determining reparations eligibility and amnesty) also prevented “any deep investigation into the complexity of apartheid and victimization” (pp. 154-168). The institution was not designed to capture this complexity, and as a result the implementation of its recommendations may not foster meaningful healing or durable peace over the longer-term in South Africa. She concludes that the final TRC report “does in fact retain and reify a simple script of victimization” (p. 168) but that it did not investigate

“norms of political intolerance in South Africa”—it generated a “democratizing truth” without deep understanding (p. 173).

Bouris’s project achieves its goal of deconstructing the “ideal” victim and in building an alternative discourse of the complex political victim, even if doing so exacerbates other tensions and trade-offs such as donor fatigue and resource scarcity. She argues that it is “ethically preferable to recognize an expanded set of victims” (p. 88), because it “seems a deeper ethical transgression” to rely on victim identity that uses an impossible standard constituted by elements like purity, innocence, lack of responsibility, and moral superiority.

At least two other possible outcomes of implementing a “complex political victim” framework beg further attention from scholars and practitioners working in this issue area. The first involves political will. Bouris notes that widening the pool of legitimate victims will compel states to take meaningful policy response. However, establishing this analytically is outside the scope of *Complex Political Victims*, and thus her assertions on this issue should be taken up and extended through follow-up research. Second and relatedly, Bouris’s analysis begs the normative question of desert. Shifting and redefining the contours of political victim discourse in the manner the author suggests can never be decoupled from perceptions of desert. Donor governments do, more than just occasionally, “favor their favorite victims.” The trends in bilateralization of both humanitarian and official development assistance and the a la carte nature of the consolidated appeals process at the international level bear this out. One of the possible trade-offs of adopting the “complex political victim” framework is that it could simply result in a net displacement effect. Rather than prompting the anticipated shift toward more effective policy on the part of states, it may instead generate a completely new yet potentially even more particularistic discourse wherein groups and individuals are assessed on the basis of whether they constitute the “ideal complex political victim.”

Getting policymakers and others to shift their understanding from “ideal” to “complex” political victim may indeed achieve many of the outcomes Bouris posits—however, it may generate corollary tensions that do not benefit victims. Her work helps us better understand what those may be, while at the same time encouraging policymakers not to run from or avoid them, but rather to take the first steps toward engaging them.

This work is suitable for graduate students in areas

of political theory, human rights, humanitarian politics, international politics, and comparative politics. It could also be integrated into advanced undergraduate courses, but would have maximum benefit for students already possessing some background in the frameworks of post-modernism and post-structuralism.

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