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[Review] *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*

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# GUILT BY ASSOCIATION

Claire Watt

*The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators (Cultural Memory in the Present)*. By Michael Rothberg. 2019. Xiii + 280p. £19.99. Stanford University Press.

ISBN 9781503609600.

*The Implicated Subject* (2019) is the latest release by renowned American Holocaust historian and memory studies scholar, Michael Rothberg. Situated within debates of memory and political responsibility, *The Implicated Subject* introduces a new figure of subjectivity and explains its utility for scholars and activists alike.

The figure of the implicated subject is suggested as a new way of considering political responsibility. Rothberg argues for the breakdown of the binary, nostalgic distinction between victim and perpetrator in existing political and ethical discourses. Deeming these categories insufficient, he demonstrates that there are often no completely innocent nor guilty parties in historical events. Rothberg explains that, in interlocking systems of oppression, '[T]he innocent, uninvolved bystander is, in most cases, an idealized myth' (202). Treating implication as a grey zone of moral responsibility, Rothberg explains that, although a subject may not be a direct agent of harm, they may still contribute to, benefit from or be involved within the nexus of such harm. Indeed, implicated subjects 'play essential roles in producing and reproducing violence and inequality' (202). Rothberg highlights the interconnectedness between subjects and seemingly geographically and temporally distant phenomena, revising nostalgic historical narratives in order to make a case for the pervasion of both genealogical and structural implication in events, regimes and their afterlives.

Rothberg structures *The Implicated Subject* around historical cases in order to demonstrate the application of this new figure of subjectivity, including the Holocaust, apartheid, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Turkish campaigns against the Kurds and transatlantic slavery. Not only does Rothberg engage with academic critics of these events, he also conducts close textual analysis of selected pieces of art and literature from each period and draws on an impressive array of global artists, writers and thinkers, including William Kentridge, Hito Steyerl, Jamaica Kincaid and Judith Butler. In each case, Rothberg illustrates the gaps present in concepts such as guilt,

responsibility, complicity and solidarity when viewed from within the binary categories of victims and perpetrators, offering implication as an alternative critical tool of analysis. Countering the recent turn towards nostalgia in war studies, Rothberg explains how individuals may be implicated in the ‘machinery’ of ‘political violence, economic exploitation, and ecological devastation’ (200) without any awareness of their involvement.

Rothberg begins by situating his argument in a genealogy of previous thinkers in order to demonstrate the need for implication to be addressed. Building on the black feminist theory of intersectionality, as well as thinkers engaged with National Socialism and the after-effects of the Holocaust, including Primo Levi, Karl Jaspers, Hannah Arendt and Simona Forti, he points to the overlooked place of implication in memory studies. Although Rothberg admits the influence of Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory, he argues that the implicated subject goes further towards analysing transgenerational justice.

Rothberg’s fluent prose combines with salient examples to make a cogent and clear argument. Although *The Implicated Subject* tackles ambitious questions, Rothberg marshals compelling and useful examples which delineate a solid explanation and application of his new concept.

Rothberg’s examination of the afterlife of transatlantic slavery is particularly illuminating. Rothberg asks difficult questions: ‘What is a legacy and who is a descendant?’ As such, Rothberg’s concept of the implicated subject engages with debates about historical redress, restitution and reparations which have accompanied attempts to confront the long-term legacies of slavery. Rothberg’s focus on structural implication—how the deeds of the past continue to shape the relations of the present—helps readers to rethink descent and proximity as implication, in order to address not just reparations for loss but how we can address the gain of those who have profited, both directly and indirectly, from the history of transatlantic slavery.

More generally, Rothberg argues that the descendants of perpetrators are not perpetrators of the same deeds as their ancestors, but are rather implicated subjects. These descendants have a future-oriented responsibility to repair and undo the acts of their ancestors, whether they benefit from them or not. Therefore, as opposed to the beneficiary, the implicated subject goes beyond the material realm into that of cultural and symbolic politics, calling for various forms of working through the past.

Perhaps the only shortcoming of the book is the way in which some of its focus appears to waver in the central chapters, particularly Chapter 4, towards discussing Rothberg's pre-existing concept of multidirectional memory. However, the conclusion brings *The Implicated Subject* back from this minor detour, ending on a strong note in which Rothberg enjoins scholars and activists alike to expand further upon his new concept of the implicated subject in their future research.

Overall, *The Implicated Subject* is both original and ground-breaking work which will be essential reading for scholars of cultural studies, political theory, critical race studies and memory studies, amongst other fields. This book allows scholars and activists a fresh way of thinking about and thus confronting personal and collective responsibility in the face of political violence and human rights abuses, opening up new arenas in debates over memory, power and responsibility. *The Implicated Subject* provides a new framework which will advance thinking about the meaning and possibility of justice and morality in the examination of not only past but present and future events.

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