

**Review of Michael Rothberg. *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019.**

Michael Rothberg's new book, *The Implicated Subject. Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, develops his seminal ideas from his 2009 study, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. While in his previous work Rothberg focused on intersecting comparative, non-competitive forms of memory deployment, his new book builds upon and nuances the entanglements and networks of previously touched-upon aspects of solidarity and complicity. He thereby contributes to recent cutting-edge scholarly works (primarily applied to World War II case studies) that conceptualize complicity as a continuum rather than a victim-perpetrator binary and an instance of an agent's relational positionality beyond the claims of dominant moral-legal accounts, one that affects the respective person's direction of engagement with the world and the types of memory resources to tap.<sup>1</sup> Rothberg argues that the broad scope of the concept he proposes, that of the "implicated subject," conceptualized as a figure of witnessing destruction, offers the possibility to "illuminate convergences—as well as contradictions—between different dilemmas: namely, the entanglement of the diachronic and synchronic, the impure positioning that render subjects fundamentally complex, and the way in which different forms of power interact and build on each other," thereby enabling "a high degree of differentiation within an overarching force field of power" (17).

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\* **Bio: Dana Mihăilescu** is associate professor of English/American Studies at the University of Bucharest, Romania. Her main research interests include Jewish (American) Studies, Holocaust (survivor) testimonies especially of child survivors, trauma, ethics and memory. She is the author of articles in *MELUS*, *Shofar*, *East European Jewish Affairs*, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, *French Cultural Studies*, *American Imago*, *European Review of History* and, most recently, of the monograph *Eastern European Jewish American Narratives, 1890-1930: Struggles for Recognition* (Lexington, 2018).

Rothberg's major claim is that the potential for scholarly use of the concept of "implicated subject" as an umbrella term beyond the binary of victim/perpetrator or the triad adding the term of bystander derives from its relation to two aspects in tension with each other: "it both draws attention to responsibilities for violence and injustice greater than most of us want to embrace and shifts questions of accountability from a discourse of guilt to a less legally and emotionally charged terrain of historical and political responsibility" (20). The book is structured in three parts, each one made up of two chapters, and mapping the various directions of the concept under scrutiny as a figure of non-narcissistic (self-)reflection.

The two chapters of Part I, "Long-Distance Legacies" offer a theoretical grounding of the concept of "implicated subject". In Chapter 1, Rothberg draws inspiration from Holocaust studies, especially entering into conversation with three scholarly research strands on the issue of World War II; these are: Primo Levi's "gray zone," creating shades or degrees of complicity; Karl Jaspers' 1946 ideas distinguishing criminal, political, moral and metaphysical guilt in the case of World War II Germany, and Hannah Arendt's 1960s philosophical writings on guilt as collective responsibility in the context of life under a dictatorship. In Chapter 2, Rothberg extends his concept of implication to the case of transatlantic slavery by building on the notion of intersectionality charted as part of the black feminist theory of multiple oppressions by the Combahee River Collective and pinpointing the need to "recognize the persistence of tainted inheritances and legacies as well as the need to break the logic of natural descent that stands behind those inheritances" (72). Here Rothberg conjectures two forms of implication, the genealogical (where one is a descendent of slaves by blood) and the structural (where one is not a blood, direct descendant of a slave but implicated with slavery in point of economic, political, social advantages, etc.). He considers that the latter form is particularly relevant in an "implicated subject" approach, allowing one to explore the afterlives of slavery in contemporary social constructions

including complicity and collaboration, keeping the focus on white beneficiaries of slavery and how they have shaped the societies in which they live for keeping their privileges.

In his book, Rothberg draws on different scholarly strands in order to define the “implicated subject,” explaining how unlike the clear-cut, absolute notions of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders from human rights discourse, “implicated subjects are morally compromised and most definitely attached—often without their conscious knowledge and in the absence of evil intent—to consequential political and economic dynamics” (33). In Rothberg’s understanding, the concept especially highlights instances of collective responsibilities for the legacies of the past of individuals who cannot be held as criminally guilty. As he explains towards the end of Chapter 2, his book adds to the lexicon of addressing redress, trauma and injustice in allowing one to consider the reverse angle from the well-developed path of postmemory generations—“those who have inherited or who have been otherwise denigrated by histories of victimization”; this novel angle he develops is that of “implicated subjects”—“those who have inherited or who have otherwise benefited from histories of perpetration” (83). By reflexively drawing our attention to “the impossibility of complete redress,” Rothberg argues that such an approach “makes justice even more urgent” (84).

Part II, “Complex Implication,” focuses on empirical case studies. Chapter 3 explores the work of South African visual artist William Kentridge, especially in *Arc/Procession* (1990), as an instance of implicated aesthetic in its reworking the Roman triumphal procession within a postcolonial and transitional justice context. Rothberg reads Kentridge’s artwork as a counternarrative linking Holocaust memory to the postapartheid condition to produce positive change in South Africa via his employment of “thick time” and a dynamic, variable space “in place of the homogeneous, empty time of progression” coupled with an implicated, embodied subject in lieu of the “the disembedded liberal subject of the transition”

(97). In Rothberg's reading, this happens thanks to a palimpsestic technique Kentrige puts forth, one which foregrounds mass movement and implication as public procession in which the reader has a perpendicular position that suggests ethical implication as political and historical responsibility at a distance. Chapter 4 zeroes in on the politics of Palestine/Israel via the concept of the "perpetuator" associated to ideological implication of diasporic communities producing further injustice via "an antagonistic logic of competition" (124). Rothberg scales ideological implication against an alternative affective implication of the same perpetuator using "memory discourses expressing a differentiated solidarity [which] offer a greater political potential" (124), one which in contemporary times when Holocaust memory has become central to moral discourses should involve "a decentering of its abstract and reified form" (139).

The chapters from Part III, "Long-Distance Solidarity," round up the discussion with two other case studies about post-Holocaust implication (chapter 5) and Kurdish identities in Turkey (chapter 6). They suggest the importance of the human rights discourse for internationalism but also pinpoint its limitations by contrasting it with socialist and anticolonial internationalisms and by following the framework of implication. In Chapter 5, Rothberg continues to investigate differentiated solidarity where differentiation is thematized as the "distance between metropolitan and (anti)colonial locations" (151) from the perspective of "the affirmative model of socialist and anti-imperialist internationalism" (153). Rothberg examines the narratives of Marceline Loridan-Ivens, the left-wing activist Holocaust survivor from France who first told her testimony of surviving Auschwitz in the cinema vérité film *Chronique d'un été* (1961) and then became involved in championing the cause of Algeria and Vietnam in the context of decolonization in her films. Rothberg shows how Loridan-Ivens' projects evince "a politicized form of remembrance" that does not sustain "the sacralization and sentimentalization of the Holocaust's uniqueness and the liberal

cosmopolitanism of human rights” (159) but the heterogeneous networks of Holocaust memory cultures as a result of transcultural exchange by navigating the idiom of personal trauma and the idiom of politics. Rothberg follows the trajectory of Loridan-Ivens’ life and work to pinpoint “the impasses of internationalisms past” and sketch “the outlines of new internationalisms” (158). As Rothberg wonderfully shows in this respect, Loridan-Ivens’ subject position has changed from first person to third person witness and from surviving victim to “implicated subject” offering solidarity; her message has also shifted “from an articulation of personal traumatization to the laughter of collective resilience in the face of overwhelming violence” (167). Chapter 6 focuses on the German artist Hito Steyerl regarding Kurdish identities at peril in Turkey as a case of “an alternate conception of internationalism by linking it to the politics of images and the problem of implication” (173) via the constant use of critique and self-critique as strategies of construction, creating what Rothberg calls “an internationalism of critique” which “seeks to redirect attention from the revolutionary subject to the agency of the image and object” (186).

Through his close analysis of various case studies from Europe, South Africa, Asia and North America, Rothberg’s new book draws attention to implication as a possible and productive venue for developing an alternative, more encompassing politics beyond the victim/perpetrator binary that has been the shaping conduit of dominant discourses of memory and human rights. In that endeavor, as he states in the conclusion, he envisions the “implicated subject” as a problem and not a solution because “[s]ocially constituted ignorance and denial are essential components of implication,” a concept which can be cognizantly transfigured “as the basis for a differentiated, long-distance solidarity” (200). Even if comprising within its three parts six chapters of which early versions of three case studies were previously published, the articles have been reworked and shaped together in order to

offer a flowing and illuminating assessment of the figure of the “implicated subject” offering new directions of analysis for cultural, memory and visual studies.

I think that a more grounded explanation of the author’s selection of the four artists and their diverse locations for his comparative study might have enhanced our understanding of the nuances of the concept of the “implicated subject.” This weaker point notwithstanding, Rothberg’s volume represents a fascinating, paradigm-shifting addition to cultural, narrative and memory studies scholarship. It proposes the concept of the “implicated subject” as a theoretical tool to be further developed by scholars in order to offer a more nuanced understanding of the discourses documenting genocidal wars and conflicts and the entangled, complex and at times contradictory interests behind human rights activists’ or internationalists’ agendas at various historical moments and in diverse locations.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chiara Lepora and Robert E. Goodin, *On complicity and compromise* (Oxford University Press, 2013); Debarati Sanyal, *Memory and Complicity. Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (Fordham University Press, 2015); Afxentis Afxentiou, Robin Dunford, and Michael Neu, eds., *Exploring complicity: Concept, cases and critique* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017) and Mihaela Mihai, “Understanding complicity: memory, hope and the imagination,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, vol. 22, no. 5 (2019): 504-522. 10.1080/13698230.2019.1565692.