

*SI: The Logic of Victimhood*

# Victimhood: The affective politics of vulnerability

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Lilie Chouliaraki 

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

## Abstract

In this article, I enquire into the historical circumstances (past and present) under which *vulnerability*, an embodied and social condition of openness to violence, turns into *victimhood*, an act of affective communication that attaches the moral value accrued to the vulnerable to everyone who claims it. The 20th-century victimhood, I argue, emerged as a master-signifier of emotional capitalism through the two grand narratives of modernity, psychoanalysis and human rights, each of which tactically mobilizes affective claims to trauma or injury to bestow the moral value of the sufferer to any powerful claimant independent of the position of vulnerability they speak from. Turning to the 21st century, I place victimhood within the communicative context of post-recession and digital neoliberalism to show how the two amplify, accelerate and complicate the circulation of affective claims to suffering, rendering platformized pain a 'new normal' of our culture. In order to address the implications of this 'new normal' on the most vulnerable in society, I propose the distinction between 'tactical' and 'systemic' vulnerability as a heuristic frame that enables us to ask questions about who claims to be a victim, from which position and to which effects; and, in so doing, helps us to scrutinize the social contexts in which affective claims to victimhood are made and the power relations such claims reproduce or challenge.

## Keywords

Affect, platform capitalism, symbolic power, victimhood, vulnerability

## Victimhood and vulnerability

On 27 September 2018, Christine Blasey Ford, Professor at Palo Alto University, appeared in front of the US Senate Judiciary Committee. She testified against Bret Kavanaugh, then

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### Corresponding author:

Lilie Chouliaraki, London School of Economics and Political Science, Fawcett House 2, 7th Floor, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: [L.Chouliaraki@lse.ac.uk](mailto:L.Chouliaraki@lse.ac.uk)

nominee for the US Supreme Court, for sexually assaulting her when they were both attending a high school party 36 years earlier. She described how Kavanaugh pinned her to a bed, groped her and removed her clothes, covering her mouth as she tried to scream: 'I believed he was going to rape me. It was hard for me to breathe, and I thought that Brett was going to accidentally kill me'. By the time her testimony ended, the hashtags #IBelieveHer, #WhyIDidntReport and #BelieveWomen had already gone viral on Twitter and Instagram, garnering support from hundreds of thousands of women around the world, including rape survivors.<sup>1</sup>

In response to Blasey Ford, Brett Kavanaugh submitted a letter to the Committee calling her testimony nothing but 'smears, pure and simple' aiming at his 'grotesque and obvious character assassination'. 'I will not be intimidated into withdrawing from the process' he asserted with tears in his eyes and social media came to his rescue with a deluge of #BackBrett tweets. Despite initial reluctance on the part of the Republican Party, senior Conservative senator John Cornyn of Texas eventually called for sympathy for Kavanaugh's victimization. 'Every female's got a father, some have a husband, some have a son', he said. 'I would think they would want those people treated fairly just like we want Dr Ford treated fairly'. President Trump, too, offered Kavanaugh his sympathy: 'It is a very scary time for young men in America, where you can be guilty of something you may not be guilty of', the President said. 'This is a very, very – this is a very difficult time'.<sup>2</sup>

The battle over Kavanaugh's nomination has been described by the media as a 'turning point' in America's history of female witnessing (TIME), as a 'tale of two internets' (Wired) and as a 'duel with tears and fury' (NYT).<sup>3</sup> Each of these headlines highlights a significant aspect of what the court battle revealed about American culture: the triumph of women's voices in the age of #MeToo, anxieties around echo chambers that divide political communication in two insulated spheres and the hyperemotional nature of politics in the era of Trump. None, however, captures the deepest, and perhaps most insidious, character of this event as a battle over who is a victim.<sup>4</sup> Christine Blasey Ford's claim to victimhood was anchored on her right to speak out as a survivor who shared her suffering in the name of public interest; Brett Kavanaugh spoke out in order to defend his 'good name': he had suffered an unexpected attack, at a moment when his illustrious 30-year legal career was reaching its pinnacle.

The Blasey Ford–Kavanaugh stand-off is, I argue, an exemplary illustration of a broader cultural condition where conflict over each party's claim to suffering, assault for her and humiliation for him, conjures up a different narrative of vulnerability and so mobilizes a distinct dynamics of solidarity – in this case, women's voices versus cultural conservatives. This pervasive use of victimhood as a moral signifier of the self in our collective conversations is by no means new. Didier Fassin and Mark Rechtman (2009), for instance, have already studied the contemporary moment as 'the empire of trauma': 'trauma', they say, 'is not confined to the psychiatric vocabulary; it is embedded in everyday usage. It has in fact created a new language of the event' (p. 7). While their account describes victimhood as a dominant discourse that has come to construct social reality (the event) as a source of pain, Fassin and Rechtman do not address the questions raised by the Blasey Ford-Kavanaugh story. What kind of world is a world of rival victimhoods? How did it come to be as it is today? What are the benefits of living in it? And, more importantly, what are the costs? It is these questions that this article grapples with.

In order to address them, I propose that we conceptualize victimhood as a structure of affective communication that renders our public conversations a terrain of struggle over competing claims to suffering and their communities of recognition. As the Blasey-Ford – Kavanaugh example suggests, recognition here refers to the process by which the status of victimhood confers on its successful claimant the moral value accrued to the vulnerable, thereby rendering them worthy of emotional response: empathy or outrage (Honneth, 2001). And it is, in Wahl-Jorgensen (2019) words, this ‘complex interplay between positive and negative emotions’ (p. 36) that my focus on victimhood as a structure of affective communication addresses. This focus, in turn, stems from my deeper interest in the role that human vulnerability plays in our culture: a western culture of relative affluence and safety compared to the rest of the world, yet deeply divided by its own inequalities of class, gender, race and sexuality. It is, in particular, an interest in the work that vulnerability does to shape the self as a public figure of suffering that produces political effects of recognition. Grounded in the acknowledgement that vulnerability is an existential dimension of the human condition, my inquiry is about the historical circumstances (past and present) under which vulnerability, an embodied and social condition of openness to violence, turns into victimhood, an act of affective communication that attaches the moral value accrued to the vulnerable to everyone who claims it.

I develop this line of inquiry in three moves. I begin with the two grand narratives of the 20th century, psychoanalysis and human rights, in order to provide a historical account of how vulnerability has come to be a master-signifier of the self in emotional capitalism (‘20th century: emotional capitalism and the rise of modern victimhood’) and, in light of this account, I proceed with a conceptual description of how victimhood works as an affective structure of communication (‘Victimhood as an affective politics’). The structure of victimhood, I show, works by tactically mobilizing these grand narratives and their affective claims to suffering, trauma or injury, in ways that systematically disconnect such claims from the social position these are articulated with, thereby bestowing the moral value of the sufferer to any successful claimant, independently of the position these are speaking from. The political efficacy of victimhood lies thus both in its durability, drawing as it does on 20th century narratives of vulnerability, and simultaneously in its mutability, as these narratives’ claims to suffering shift and transmute, bringing together different communities of recognition within different historical contexts. Turning to the 21st century, then, my second move situates the affective uses of victimhood within the current communicative context of post-recession neoliberalism and platform publicity. My argument is that the convergence of the post-2008 crisis moment with the explosion of social media platforms has contributed to a neoliberal ‘new normal’ that has today expanded, complicated and accelerated the affective politics of victimhood so that, as Brown (2017) puts it, ‘one’s position in the world is now seen only through a lens of being a victim’ (p. 84; ‘The 21st century: Post-recession neoliberalism and the platformization of pain’). In order to interrogate the implications of this politics of victimhood on the most vulnerable in society, my third move introduces the distinction between ‘tactical’ and ‘systemic’ vulnerability as a heuristic frame that enables us to ask questions about who claims to be a victim, from which position and to which effects; and, in so doing, to scrutinize the social contexts and power relations that victimhood claims reproduce or challenge (‘Victimhood and power’).

## **The 20th century: emotional capitalism and the rise of modern victimhood**

The 20th century saw the emergence of two ‘grand narratives’ (Lyotard, 1984), psychoanalysis and human rights, each of which told different stories of individual vulnerability, yet ultimately both arrived at a similar ending: the notion of the self as a sufferer. Part of a dazzling history of ideas (psychoanalysis, marxism, liberalism, postcolonialism) that informed and shaped the 20th century’s momentous events (world wars, holocaust, decolonization), these two narratives have been crucial in shaping western conceptions of who is a victim.

It is, in particular, Eva Illouz’s (2007) description of 20th century modernity as ‘emotional capitalism’ that frames my own understanding of these narratives as catalysts in the making of the contemporary self. Illouz’s point is that the socio-economic organization of liberal capitalism, with its emphasis on the self-expressive individual, brings with it a new culture of emotionality; one where affirming one’s presence among others in civil society is about claiming one’s personal pain: ‘modern identity’ is, Illouz (2007) says, ‘increasingly performed . . . through a narrative which combines the aspiration to self-realization with the claim to emotional suffering’ (p. 4). Because this emotionality of suffering, Illouz (2007) argues, is assumed to speak to the human condition of vulnerability beyond specific political interests (everyone feels pain), affective claims to suffering can thus be mobilized by any ideology to help forge political community. Both a feminist politics of civic duty and a reactionary affirmation of male identity, put simply, can rely on the tears of their respective victims in order to animate collectivities of empathetic support. The success of emotional capitalism to align the ‘losers’ of neoliberal capitalism with the very perpetrators of their victimhood, as in the post-recession populist governments across western democracies, lies precisely in this capacity of suffering to disavow any a priori political attachment and, by claiming the ‘truth’ of the human condition, to tactically attach itself to different positions on the spectrum.

How did this come to be? How did the emotionality of pain manage to speak the language of political universality? Going beyond the common humanist assumption that pain transcends politics and speaks to ‘our’ common humanity, my argument is that, on the contrary, pain entails its own politics of emotion. It is, I contend, this affective politics of pain that, grounded as it is on the communication of the two 20th century grand narratives of suffering, comes to shape the contemporary self as a victim. Illouz’s own interest lies in psychoanalysis, but my inquiry demands that we broaden this focus to engage with yet another key narrative of modernity, human rights.

### ***Psychoanalysis***

The psychoanalytic narrative aspires to heal the hidden vulnerabilities of the psyche through conversational therapy. Drawing on the Greek term *trauma*, meaning wound, the traumatized self of psychoanalysis is a self that has been shattered, following an overwhelming experience of violence or loss; an experience that cannot be rationalized yet recursively returns as a haunting feeling to disrupt the coherence of our existence. Violent events are regarded as central to the wound of the self, for instance, in the way the

Holocaust became a collective trauma experienced in silence among Jewish people for the first decade after their liberation from the camps (Zelizer, 1998). In fact, however, dominant strands of psychoanalysis think of trauma as something that is not primarily historical, occurring in the course of human timelines, but profoundly existential, beginning with life itself. Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, for instance, speak of trauma as the primordial violence of separation that occurs at birth and in early infancy as human beings leave the womb and are ‘born into language’ (Lacan 1993: 9 in Stavrakakis 2017: 83). And it is language that keeps hurting us. As a means of self-expression, language leads to miscommunication, misunderstandings and ultimately silence, while, as a mechanism of repression, it never fully succeeds in protecting us from our deepest wounds – life always manages to trigger the primary event and threaten anew our inner self (Mitchell, 1998).

The rise of what Illouz (1999) calls the ‘therapeutic culture’ of emotional capitalism is driven precisely by this narrative, where we are all victims of the very processes of socialization that enable us to grow into adulthood. In this culture, we are never ‘fully grown up’, as Alexander (2013) puts it, ‘but remain childlike in an adult world hoping as much for dependence as for autonomy’ (p. 143). In response to such infantilizing pathologies, psychotherapeutic interaction, the speaking out about one’s vulnerabilities in order to ‘tame’ the unconscious, started on the therapist’s couch but it has since moved into the public realm. Therapy or ‘psy’ talk, as Rose (2002) notes, is today fully entrenched in western ways of speaking, routinely orienting our interactions towards the imperatives of self-care and empathetic listening: ‘When we speak to our friends and acquaintances about the ills that trouble us or the hopes that animate us’, he says,

our conversations will be studded with psychological terms—stress, anxiety, motivation, personality, self-esteem and so on. Even when we are alone, in our most intimate experiences of ourselves, psy allows us to understand the actions of those around us, to describe our personality, passions and hopes, to understand our sorrows and calibrate our disappointments, to project and embark upon a future for ourselves. (p.236)

Even though this centrality of emotional pain in the formation of the modern self has a much longer history than the 20th century (Berlant 2008; Chouliaraki, 2013), its contemporary mutation into therapy talk has gradually established empathy as a primary emotion of the liberal polity and thus turned citizenship into a largely affective experience, ‘a genuine pedagogy of feelings and introspection’ that aims as much at healing the self as at shaping the liberal polity (Boltanski, 1999: 88).

A key feature of this modern status of empathy as a civic emotion is the institutional embeddedness of therapy in media platforms and discourses. In her analysis of television talk shows, for instance, Illouz (1999) reflects on the ways in which therapy talk has become a privileged site for the performance of a ‘*suffering and victimized self*’ that seeks to ‘empower itself by *talking* about its predicaments’ (pp. 119, 123; emphasis in the original). Similarly, the #IBelieveHer or #MeToo hashtags can be seen as collective iterations of personal pain organized around what Papacharissi (2016) calls ‘soft structures of storytelling’ (p. 321) that amplify women’s experiences of sexual harm. Even though both are potentially empowering practices that, by publicizing female pain, can encourage bonds

of feminist solidarity, the commercial nature of those media platforms introduces a radical ambivalence to these structures: hyper-emotive story-telling may amplify the reach of private pain across audiences but does not necessarily explore the social reasons of personal suffering. As Gill and Orgad (2018: 1320) ask, speaking of #MeToo, 'is it sexism . . . or sex that "sells"?' thereby turning female testimonies into sensational narratives disconnected from 'the monstrous capitalist, patriarchal and sexist system' that produces and sustains them.

In summary, while profoundly significant in shaping contemporary forms of public self-expression and civic empathy, the narrative of psychotherapy today tends to perform victimhood within a particular context of commodified healing. This is a context that validates claims to inner pain as a universal property of the human psyche and, at the same time, disconnects these claims from their structural conditions of existence while monetizing them for the benefit of the few.

### *Human rights*

Even though, like psychoanalysis, the narrative of human rights places the vulnerable self within a similar dialogic sociality, the two narratives differ. If psychotherapy is about vulnerability as a private emotion, human rights are about vulnerability as social position. The universal 'human person' of the rights narrative is here no longer the traumatized self of therapeutic interaction but the injured self of legal protection against physical and symbolic violence (Turner, 2006).

This human rights narrative appears throughout the 20th century in two key political discourses that have shaped the liberal polity of our times: the discourse of *revolution* that casts social injury as the driving force for social struggle and change, and the discourse of *reformation* that regards injury as the motivation of institutional reform for the protection of the person. On one hand, the discourse of *revolution* treats injury as the social effect of dominant economic and political structures that subordinate and disenfranchise certain social groups, be these the working class under capitalism, women under patriarchy or Black populations under colonialism. Marxian narratives, for instance, may have not always adopted (and in fact opposed) the language of rights, yet, as Moyn (2018) notes, they did articulate the late-19th century struggles of workers' socialist protests firmly within the discourse of the 'rights of man' – particularly the 'right to work' as a 'minimum core' of 'human dignity' (pp. 26, 200); early feminism similarly mobilized the language of rights to redress the masculinist, class-driven rhetoric of socialist movements and to demand an enhanced understanding of injury that critiqued patriarchy's division of labour and its confinement of women to the domestic sphere (Phillips 1995); the anti-slavery movement framed the problem of post-slavery, namely 'what to do about, to or for the newly freed population' (Jones, 2017: 23), as a struggle for civil rights, which were meant to guarantee black people's equal membership in the political community of the American nation.

The discourse of *reformation*, on the other hand, is concerned with safeguarding a social order that may continue to be unequal yet still observes the principle of protecting the vulnerable. Reformation reflects, in this sense, a specific historical moment of post-Second World War politics that insists on treating injury as social harm to be addressed,



but, instead of social change, it now concentrates on the peace-driven agenda of social protection – keeping people safe from various forms of violence. In this post-war order, Nash (2019) claims, ‘the human rights movement has grown to address state violence and persecution, not the structural injustices of global capitalism’ (p. 2). The contemporary ‘human person’, combining conservative, Christian and liberal democratic visions of the injured self, is thus no longer a class-, race- or gender-specific individual but an all-encompassing figure of vulnerability that continues, to this day, to act as a universal signifier in global politics: ‘human rights’, as Moyn (2010) puts it, ‘have become the core language of a *new politics of humanity* that has sapped the energy from old ideological contests of left and right’ (p. 227, emphasis added).

Like therapy, then, the narrative of rights assumes that the self is fundamentally a vulnerable figure that needs to communicate its suffering to command recognition. Unlike therapy with its reliance on empathy, however, rights draws on the affective register of indignation, in its two distinct versions: the denunciatory and the reconciliatory. Denunciation is defined by anger, an emotion that manifests itself in social movement protests against the structural injustices that lead to social injury, as for instance, the Indignados in Spain during the 2015 economic crisis or the Gilets Jaunes in 2019 France: ‘anger and moral outrage on behalf of the suffering victims’ as Pantti and Wahl-Jørgensen (2008) put it, ‘can be a powerful motivation for dissent and opposition when there is someone to blame for the injustice’ (p. 18). Reformation relies instead on the registers of ‘reasonableness, pragmatism, and modesty’ and informs policy-making rationalities that correct institutional practices without necessarily challenging the power relations of society (Burke, 2017: 95). This reconciliatory language of rights is today a key part of political struggles in the name of the vulnerable, seeking recognition of their suffering whether in humanitarian or social movement imaginaries (Bellamy, 2009).

Even though rights-driven policy debates today constitute an important site of progressive reforms and struggles for equality (Lippert and Hamilton 2020), at the same time, like therapy, human rights have been accused of becoming part-and-parcel of the neoliberal marketization of the institutions that support it. In order to survive global competition, Amnesty International or Save the Children, for instance, utilize branding strategies that foreground the value of the organization or the pleasures of consumerist good-doing at the expense of explaining the structural causes of injustice or justifying why human rights action is needed. In so doing, as Chouliaraki (2013) argues, they ‘not only disconnect suffering from questions of systemic inequality but further subordinate it to an instrumentalised discourse of western self-empowerment’ (p. 184).

To summarize human rights, a grand narrative of modernity animated by visionary projects of social progress, revolutionary or reformative, has been and remains instrumental in catalysing social change. Today, however, it tends to perform suffering within a particular regime of commodified activism – a regime that both acts as an invitation to recognize injury as an assault against right-bearing persons and, at the same time, as a global market that profits from the circulation of claims to suffering while stripping those claims from their social contexts of power.

## Victimhood as an affective politics of vulnerability

The aim of this historical review has been to situate victimhood in the context of 20th-century emotional capitalism and to reconstruct the grand narratives that participate in

the emergence of an affective politics of victimhood. If there is a key insight emerging out of this review, it is that victimhood cannot be seen as a single and coherent signifier of the self but as a dispersed and mutable structure of communication that mobilizes claims, 'I feel traumatised' or 'I am injured', to assert the self as a sufferer and so invite us to respond to them in empathy or indignation. What this mutable structure suggests is that victimhood does not already presuppose a stable relationship between the self and their 'objective' trauma or injury. Rather, the communication of victimhood is precisely about the work of provisionally stabilizing the relationship between the self and its claims to vulnerability, as the two are put together or, in Hall's (1986: 53) words, 'articulated' in ways that are 'not necessary, determined, absolute and essential for all time' but change in line with their historical and social contexts.

As a consequence of these non-necessary articulations of vulnerability with the self, the emotions of suffering also blur and mix so that the communication of suffering does not always appear in the form of pure empathy or pure indignation but is articulated in hybrid claims, where the two emotions co-exist. This takes us back to our example. Both Blasey Ford's painful testimony and Kavanaugh's aggressive self-defence are, in this light, instances of affective hybridity in that both actors claimed both trauma – caused by sexual abuse or character assassination, respectively; and injury – speaking out to protect others from damage or to protect themselves from reputation loss. Their claims, in turn, mobilize distinct suffering selves. Blasey Ford's 'powerful vulnerability' (see Note 1) strengthened her identity as a good citizen and she was subsequently praised for being 'pretty credible, pretty likable, pretty believable', (see Note 2) while Kavanaugh's tearful face downplayed his political identity and presented him as a plain vulnerable man – 'every female's' 'father', 'husband', 'son' as Sen Cornyn put it.

Affective hybridity shows here not only how victimhood articulates claims of the self with the emotions of suffering – using trauma to amplify outrage (Blasey Ford) or to displace it (Kavanaugh) – but also how, in so doing, it can summon the self in simultaneously various relationships to vulnerability. Both protagonists appear thus as sufferers: they are both wounded and wronged; as perpetrators: they have inflicted pain upon one another; and as survivors: Blasey-Ford's vulnerability was praised as 'actually super-power'<sup>5</sup> and Kavanaugh's tears mixed with the defiant posture of 'I will not give up'. By relying on the 'non-necessary' articulation of the self with vulnerability, victimhood here not only makes it possible for any self to claim any pain, as I have already established, but, crucially, also blurs the very distinction between victim and perpetrator and so breaks the boundary between who is violent and who is violated. Kavanaugh's accusation of Blasey Ford can, in this light, be described as an act of 'anti-victimism', in Cole's (2006) vocabulary, where the perpetrator's own tears aim at casting suspicion on the victim's motives with a view to discrediting her testimony.

It is, I propose, this urgent attention to the *claim to suffering*, the visible or audible act of communicating injury or trauma, at the expense of an inquiry into the *condition of the self*, the invisible position of openness to violence one occupies in social space, that endows victimhood with its political efficacy. It is, in particular, the pressure for an immediate response to pain that affective signs (tears or screams) generate in public, which inevitably suppress questions of what context these claims are made in, that lies at the heart of such efficacy. The historical taboo of emotional capitalism to shame those



who stop and scrutinize where a claim to pain comes from and how it is justified is eloquently captured by Boltanski (1999), when he asks ‘Who, for example, would dream of saying that the inhabitants of a country ravaged by famine have what they deserve?’, concluding that ‘the urgency of action needing to be taken to bring an end to the suffering invoked always prevails over considerations of justification’ (p. 5).

Rather than an inconsequential add-on to public discourse, we have now seen how the affective politics of vulnerability and its systematic elision of questions of justification is actually constitutive of liberal modernity and the struggles for domination that take place in it. In fact, I would argue with Arendt (1973) that, just as existing systems of domination are kept in place by using lies to blur the boundaries between fact and rumour, so the spread of victimhood consolidates existing social hierarchies by blurring the lines between systemic and tactical suffering. Suffering as a condition that ties the self onto broader circumstances that perpetuate physical or symbolic violence and suffering as a claim adopted by individuals or groups for their gain. It is this unstable articulation between claim and condition that endows the affective structure of victimhood with its enduring mutability, and enables the historical narratives of trauma and injury to adapt the “universal” language of pain to changing contexts, yet simultaneously to continue sustaining the social hierarchies which such claims may come to serve.

What is it then about the contemporary context that defines the affective structure of victimhood as we experience it today? How do claims to vulnerability spread and reproduce in the 21st century?

## **The 21st century: post-recession neoliberalism and the platformization of pain**

While victimhood as a structure of affective communication is, as we saw, deeply grounded in these narratives of the past, there is nonetheless something irreducibly new about the communication of victimhood in the 21st century. It is, in particular, two processes that have expanded and accelerated this dislocation of claim from condition in current public discourse: post-recession neo-liberalism and the rise of social media platforms.

### *The harms of post-recession neoliberalism*

What is distinct about 21st century victimhood, I argue, is that vulnerability is situated within a post-recession moment that, following the 2008 economic crisis, has not only impoverished the already poor but has also threatened to impoverish the middle classes around the world (Bermeo and Bartells, 2014). The paradox of this historical moment is this. Despite highlighting the catastrophic weaknesses of the neoliberal order, namely the thin governance and immoral culture of its global financial institutions, not only did this order not recede but it used the crisis to renew its grip on nation-states and roll the costs of the crisis back to the people. Budget slashing, fiscal restraint and enforced austerity created, what Peck et al. (2012) call, a post-crisis ‘new normal’, ‘where the costs of restructuring and insecurity are being visited, once again, upon the poor and the vulnerable’ (pp. 266–267). It is this stubborn commitment to the market-driven logic of profit

at the expense not only of the vulnerable but also of the relatively safe in western societies that, in the past decade, precipitated popular distrust towards all forms of institutional authority and technocratic expertise – from banks to politicians to the media (Dahlgren, 2018).

As Grossberg (2018) writes of the post-recession moment, citizens now ‘experience themselves as victims of people or forces outside of their immediate lives and communities, in circumstances of economic and racial anxiety, which result in expressions of resentment, rage and even a reactionary desire for revenge’ (pp. 20–21). Grossberg suggests that neoliberalism not only materially sustains the divide between rich and poor, between the privileged and the (newly) disadvantaged, but it also inflicts serious emotional harms on the latter, perpetuating their anxieties and affirming their self-perception as victims – what Nikos Demertzis (2006) calls the ‘lived experience of injustice’ (p. 111) as a sense of being deprived of something rightly belonging to you. Class and gender are two of the distinct sites where victimhood articulates acute post-recession emotions of the self – although the two are always encountered as already intersected and intertwined with one another (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

One way in which class-related neoliberal harm is inflicted is by valorizing norms of success and talent that are exclusively associated with money and status and so end up consigning the large majority of people who have not ‘made it’ to the status of ‘losers’: ‘under neoliberal conditions’, argues Davies (2016), ‘remorse becomes directed inwards, producing the depressive psychological effect (or what Freud termed “melancholia”) whereby people search inside themselves for the source of their own unhappiness and imperfect lives’ (p. xvii). Hochschild’s (2016) study of Louisiana’s disadvantaged Americans who supported the Tea Party situates this psychology of ‘losers’ within a political system that ‘both creates pain and deflects blame for that pain’ (p.10). She describes how the ultra-conservative, racist voters of the South were driven to the populist right by a sense of disconnection from their own state institutions, which, they felt, had done nothing to support them in their hour of need. Trump’s election as an anti-establishment candidate, commentators noted, captured precisely this sensibility of resentment and the political imagination of the ‘forgotten’.<sup>6</sup>

Gender-related harms, at the same time, are reflected, for instance, in the vicious attacks of male chauvinism against women’s testimonies of patriarchal violence. Trump’s statement, ‘this is a very [ . . . ] difficult time’ for ‘young boys’ in response to Blasey Ford’s testimony, is an example of this. His reversal of empathy from the female victim to her perpetrator is what Banet-Weiser (2019) describes as an ‘insidious flip’ in the structure of ‘neoliberal patriarchy’ – a system that tends to individualize the historical subordination of women to patriarchal systems of oppression by disconnecting their claims to suffering from these systems and linking them up to consumerist activism. While neoliberal patriarchy depoliticizes women’s claims to victimhood by inviting them to wear a ‘Lean-In’ badge or an ‘I am a feminist’ t-shirt, it also, Banet-Weiser continues, presents the individual man’s suffering, Kavanaugh’s tears for being disgraced, as an attack against all men: ‘This rerouted victimhood’, she concludes, ‘works to retrench patriarchal gender relations by redefining what it means to be disempowered, vulnerable, and violated’.<sup>7</sup>

What these two examples suggest is that the post-recession context helps us better understand how the affective politics of pain, delinked from those who are subjected to

the multiple harms of neoliberalism and attached to those who most benefit from it, contributes to obfuscating the structural relations of power within which social struggles take place and so contributes to current political developments, such as authoritarian populism and popular misogyny.

### *The platformization of pain*

The platformization of pain, that is the communication, amplification and monetization of vulnerability on and through social media platforms (Van Dijck et al., 2018), is just as responsible for transforming the premises upon which victimhood is today claimed as post-recession neoliberalism. Platformization has achieved this by two means: by reorganizing the communicative structure of vulnerability, and by expanding the realms of suffering in which victimhood can be claimed.

To begin with, platformization has enabled everyone with a mobile phone and a social media account to enter the communicative structure of victimhood and broadcast their pain. Such openness has been greeted as a democratizing move, as when Lim (2012) argues that the 2011 Arab Spring protests largely relied on the infrastructures of social media, notably Facebook and Twitter, as ‘the means to shape repertoires of contention, frame the issues, propagate unifying symbols, and transform online activism into offline protests’ (p. 231). This expansion of voice, however, is less about the platforms’ intentions to circulate benign content and more about their business models that capitalize on any content to grab user attention for profit. Blommaert (2018), for example, discusses the ‘manosphere’, a male-only community of self-righteous misogynists that spread their ‘acute ideology of victimhood’ as an excuse for attacking women, in websites such as incels.com. Rather than social media deliberately advocating patriarchal hate speech, such amplification of misogyny should best be seen as a matter of the algorithmic logic of platforms that, in the pursuit of profit, maximize the visibility of any claim to vulnerability to monetize user engagement: ‘the misogynist “manosphere”’, as Dragiewicz et al.’s (2018) research shows, ‘is significantly empowered by the ability to exploit the affordances and algorithmic characteristics of the contemporary digital media environment’ (p. 621).

Platformization, then, as these examples demonstrate, reorganizes the communicative structure of victimhood in terms of how and by whom claims to suffering are made, who gets visibility and which online communities get legitimized and empowered or not. At the heart of this process lies a new logic of affective communication driven by the techno-economic architectures of social media platforms (Papacharissi, 2016). It is, on one hand, the platforms’ structural capacity for anonymous and asynchronous communication that enables competing claims to pain to proliferate online, disconnected from their conditions of emergence – that is, both from the identity of the claimant (anonymity) and the context of the claim (asynchronicity) – and so to further dismantle the distinction between sufferer and perpetrator. And on the other hand, it is the platforms’ orientation towards virality – quantifying user engagement by response counts (retweets, likes) and size of communities (followers) – that tends to amplify already popular claims to suffering without asking questions about who makes them or in which contexts of violence or vulnerability they appear.

Beyond restructuring the affective communication of vulnerability, platformization has also expanded the realms of vulnerability within which claims to victimhood can be made. It is digital violence, particularly (but not exclusively) in the form of online hate speech, that has today extended the realms of suffering. Just as for offline, online hate speech is about attacking persons or groups on the basis of their race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation, but unlike the offline, online attacks can now reach previously protected spaces, such as the home, and persist in time, as past abuse can exist indefinitely in digital archives (Brown, 2017). Focusing on these new ways in which the digital realm both sustains and expands the violence of pre-digital encounters, Livingstone (2014) notes that research on cyberharms should concentrate on the spaces of connection between the two, where ‘mobile and online risks . . . [are] increasingly intertwined with pre-existing (offline) risks in children’s lives’ (p. 635). Cyberbullying among school children, for instance, extends and potentially intensifies claims to trauma already made about schoolyard bullying (Schneider et al 2012), while trolling raises claims to trauma by causing psychological harm and potentially leads to social injury in that it can silence citizen voice and consolidate existing social hierarchies (Henry and Powell, 2015).

This proliferation of acts of digital violence has inevitably expanded the languages of recognition through which new vulnerabilities can be debated and validated online. Whether it is empathy towards children’s trauma in anti-cyberbullying campaigns, or denunciation against the injuries of speech in anti-troll activism, the platformization of victimhood forces a systematic rethinking of our therapeutic practices and activist interventions. Dominated by psychology discourses and rights-based policy engagements, the realm of digital recognition involves today a re-specialization of psychotherapeutic discourse, by way of updating counselling discourses, introducing self-empowering toolkits and reskilling the parties involved (for digital parenting, Mascheroni and Holloway, 2019; for ‘digital detox’, Syvertsen and Enli, 2019). It also involves discourses of rights in the digital age, where evidence-based policy-making navigates a fine line between recognizing harms and appreciating opportunities for vulnerable users (Livingstone, 2014; Livingstone and Third, 2017).

There is no doubt that digital recognition is today a key site of struggle against corporate and state agendas for citizen rights and mental health (Byrne and Burton, 2017). Such languages, however, have inevitably also been problematized for being co-opted by those very agendas as a tool of surveillance and commodification. Behaviour monitoring apps, for example, promise to promote self-empowerment or protect the most vulnerable, yet they simultaneously operate as modes of ‘dataveillance’ (Lupton and Williamson, 2017), storing massive amounts of personal data for commercial purposes and so producing ‘new varieties of commodification, monetization, and control’ (Zuboff, 2015: 76, 85).

To summarize, if the 20th century saw the emergence of narratives of vulnerability as a key terrain of struggle for the legitimization of private pain and the alleviation of social injuries against state or corporate power, the 21st century accentuated such struggles in the context of neoliberal politics and corporate platforms. As a result, claims to suffering – trauma and rights – have today become both more specialized and diffuse in the public sphere and more all-encompassing and ambivalent in their social effects. First, by expanding the sites wherein claims to trauma or injury can be

made, platformized suffering may be encouraging institutional reforms to protect the vulnerable from markets but it also leads to a further entrenchment of the already commodified languages of victimhood, in our public conversations. The more vulnerable people become online, simply put, the more these languages are reinvented and repackaged as a resource for them to make sense of their suffering. Second, by reorganizing the structures of affective communication through which claims to suffering circulate, platformized victimhood may amplify their visibility, yet shape and regulate this visibility in line with tech-industry interests. The more people go online to voice their pain, in other words, the more their claims – already decoupled from their conditions of emergence – spread through new social logics of anonymity and popularity that now render the link between claims to pain and their conditions essentially irrelevant.

A prominent feature of such marketized claims to trauma or injury is that, in the name of economic profit, they tend to personalize pain and neglect the structural causes that lie behind it. Pain, as a consequence, becomes ‘something that’, as Grossberg (2018) puts it, ‘belongs to anyone who cares to embrace it’ (pp. 248–249). In this context, pointing out this distinction between condition and claim is not only analytically important, as I hope to have shown, but also normatively significant. For, as Brooks puts it, it helps us tell the difference between ‘promoting a victimhood culture’ and ‘fighting for victimized people’<sup>8</sup>; the former has so far been the object of my critique, while the latter is the object of my concluding discussion.

## Victimhood and power

Post-recession neoliberalism and the platformization of communication form a new cultural juncture within which the generalized anxieties of class, race, gender or sexuality float freely, confuse the violent with the violated and summon communities of recognition competing with one another over their trauma or injury. Claims to suffering, delinked from those who are subjected to the multiple harms of neoliberalism and attached to those who most benefit from it, participate in this broader landscape of online disinformation, leading to confusion. Worse than this, such claims ultimately obfuscate the structural conditions of the most vulnerable and avoid restoring the harms done or addressing the injustices that cause it.

In this light, the critical analysis of victimhood, I argue, should perhaps best begin with the radical contingency of the victim. It is clear, by now, that our analyses cannot assume a pre-existing connection between affective claims to suffering and the structural conditions these emanate from. Rather, my recurrent distinction between claim and condition is meant to function as a heuristic device through which to interrogate the articulatory relationship between the two, in specific contexts of use. Instead then of analysing ‘victimhood in general’, seeking to separate ‘real’ from ‘fake’ victims, maybe we need to focus on making explicit the questions that matter: Under which conditions do certain claims to suffering constitute certain selves as victims? Which positions of power do these selves speak from? What kinds of benefits do their claims accrue to them and the communities they bring together? And what kinds of exclusions do these claims presuppose and consolidate?

These questions thematize power. They alert us to the fact that claims to vulnerability do not occur in a vacuum but are always spoken from a position that reflects and reconstitutes the structural relationships of power that this position occupies in social space (Chouliaraki, 2013). Following Ahmed's Marxian metaphor of the capacity to speak as a 'form of capital', I similarly propose that claims to pain do not only attach value to those who appear as victims, as I have argued so far, but already presuppose the existence of such value for those claimants, who, in speaking out, further enhance their capital for themselves. Kavanaugh's public meltdown, let us recall, mobilized a wave of support on Twitter, which not only affirmed his identity but also legitimized his election into the Supreme Court: 'The value originally advanced', as Ahmed (2004: 120) notes, 'not only remains intact while in circulation, but increases its magnitude, adds to itself a surplus-value or is valorized. And this movement converts it into capital' (Marx M, 1976 [1867]: 252). It is this process of 'capital accumulation', where some but not others can speak out and gain recognition, that renders the affective politics of victimhood both an open 'market' and a radically unequal one: 'being recognised as a victim', as Jacoby (2014) says, 'is a right and even arguably, a privilege, not equally bestowed on all injured people' (p. 517).

The main implication of this differential capacity in claiming pain is that public appeals to victimhood tend to reproduce existing hierarchies of social power. For insofar as the affective politics of vulnerability privileges the voices of the powerful over the powerless, the suffering of those most in need of being heard – those whose suffering is systemic – goes unnoticed. McMillan Cottom captures this structural incapacity as a matter of distance from positions of symbolic power, defining it as 'the farther away you move from our dominant assumptions about who should have expertise'.<sup>9</sup> Under conditions of post-recession neo-liberalism, claims to suffering are, indeed, largely voiced by the disaffected middle classes that, in Phipps' (2020) words, 'tend to be highly visible internationally because western media forms are dominant across the globe' (p. 4), while the suffering of social minorities is marginalized or fully erased. In this light, even though the Blasey Ford-Kavanaugh example helped illustrate the power dynamics between a privileged White man and an accomplished yet less privileged woman, it also obscured the fact that both actors possess enough symbolic power to define their own suffering in public. Others cannot; 'silence', as McNay (2012) says, represents 'the ways in which individuals often find it difficult to put into words experiences of deprivation that are lived as feelings of shame, boredom, hopelessness and so on' (p. 230). It is those precarious, silent selves, whose suffering remains routinely un-acknowledged, that our critical focus on victimhood should seek to highlight.

Even though, therefore, everyone can feel that they are victims, including Kavanaugh whose sense of injustice, let us recall, stems from the risk of losing something he believes he is entitled to, response to their suffering should pose the question of 'why?'. Why is Kavanaugh's suffering worthy of a response? Which social position is he speaking from? Which group gains from his claim? Importantly, who loses out? The question of why by no means suggests that we resort to an impartial verdict of whose pain is worthy or unworthy of response. Rather, this question gestures towards a process of collective judgement by which claims to pain can be justified and evaluated in our public conversations, potentially interrupting the viral networks of platform victimhood and re-situating such claims back to their embodied – classed, gendered, racialized and



sexualized – conditions of vulnerability, highlighting, in this way, the invisible relationship between claim and the social interests it serves.

Even though such interruptions already exist as sporadic interventions in our public discourse, and have indeed taken place in the case of the Kavanaugh and Blasey Ford standoff, I further contend that, unless we fundamentally challenge the platform logics wherein claims to suffering are embedded, these interruptions will not be enough to shift the terms of the debate from affective appeals to ‘I have been wronged’ to deliberations of justification. For, even though the affective politics of victimhood has a longer history, the platformization of communication in post-recession capitalism has, as I have shown, greatly contributed to amplifying the claims of the already powerful at the expense of the voices of the powerless. It is, in particular, the commodification of our languages of recognition, the digital economy of user attention and the algorithmic regulation of voice that demand our scrutiny. While the former, let us recall, refers to the ways in which languages of recognition are today adapting to the business requirements of a global digital market, branding solidarity and enfolding therapeutic encounters in metrics and surveillance tools, the latter two are about the ways in which such business requirements structure the possibilities of visibility for claims to pain and the patterns of engagement with them.

Incorporating such structural changes in the economic and technological logics of public discourse involves asking the question of what are necessary moves if we are to interrupt the emotional circuits of pain in our public discourse and instead allow the voices of those structurally open to violence to be heard and recognized. It may of course appear hard to break with the historical taboo of liberal modernity that, rather than stopping and inquiring, demands our immediate response to the urgency of human pain. Yet, while we cannot escape the legacies of our public discourse, we can nonetheless engage critically with its political logics and imagine anew the vocabularies that already exist in the margins of liberal polity. Namely that human vulnerability is not about victimhood but injustice.

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## ORCID iD

Lilie Chouliaraki  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5683-4691>

## Notes

1. <https://www.wellandgood.com/good-advice/christine-blasey-ford-vulnerability-strength/>
2. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/09/christine-blasey-ford-pernicious-demand-be-likable/571555/>
3. BBC News 23 September 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-45621124>
4. CNN News 3 March 2018, <http://www.google.co.uk/amp/s/amp.cnn.com/cnn/2018/10/3/politics/donald-trump-brett-kavanaugh-sexual-misconduct-allegations/index.html>
5. *New York Times*, 27 September 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/27/us/politics/brett-kavanaugh-confirmation-hearings.html>; *Wired*, 27 September 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/blasey-ford-kavanaugh-filter-bubbles/>; *TIME Magazine*, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2018, <https://time.com/5401624/brett-kavanaugh-confirmation/>

6. But see Banet-Weiser 22 February 2019, 'Popular feminism: Male victimhood' in *LA Review of Books* <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/popular-feminism-male-victimhood/>
7. *Well and Good*, 27 September 2018, <https://www.wellandgood.com/good-advice/christine-blasey-ford-vulnerability-strength/>
8. *Washington Post* 3 August 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/03/resentful-white-people-propelled-trump-to-the-white-house-and-he-is-rewarding-their-loyalty/?utm\\_term=.f3a0b0a41314](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/08/03/resentful-white-people-propelled-trump-to-the-white-house-and-he-is-rewarding-their-loyalty/?utm_term=.f3a0b0a41314) and *New York Times* August 3 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/04/upshot/estranged-america-trump-polarization.html>
9. McMillan Cottom 21 January 2019, 'In 'Thick,' Tressie McMillan Cottom Looks At Beauty, Power And Black Womanhood In America' <https://www.wbur.org/onpoint/2019/01/21/in-thick-tressie-mcmillan-cottom-looks-at-beauty-power-and-black-womanhood-in-america>

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### Biographical note

Lilie Chouliaraki is a professor at the Department of Media and Communication at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is the author of, among others, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (Sage, 2006) and *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (Polity, 2013).