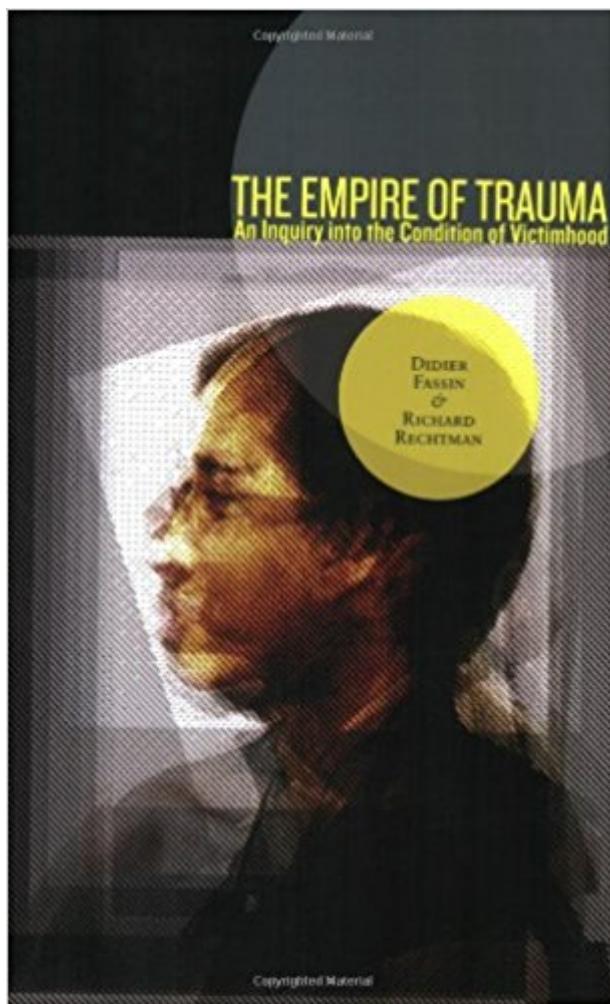


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# The Empire Of Trauma: An Inquiry Into The Condition Of Victimhood



## **Synopsis**

Today we are accustomed to psychiatrists being summoned to scenes of terrorist attacks, natural disasters, war, and other tragic events to care for the psychic trauma of victims--yet it has not always been so. The very idea of psychic trauma came into being only at the end of the nineteenth century and for a long time was treated with suspicion. The Empire of Trauma tells the story of how the traumatic victim became culturally and politically respectable, and how trauma itself became an unassailable moral category. Basing their analysis on a wide-ranging ethnography, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman examine the politics of reparation, testimony, and proof made possible by the recognition of trauma. They study the application of psychiatric victimology to victims of the 1995 terrorist bombings in Paris and the 2001 industrial disaster in Toulouse; the involvement of humanitarian psychiatry with both Palestinians and Israelis during the second Intifada; and the application of the psychotraumatology of exile to asylum seekers victimized by persecution and torture. Revealing how trauma has come to authenticate the suffering of victims, The Empire of Trauma provides critical perspective on some of the moral and political issues at stake in the contemporary world.

## **Book Information**

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press; 1 edition (July 26, 2009)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691137536

ISBN-13: 978-0691137537

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 9.1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 5.0 out of 5 stars 1 customer review

Best Sellers Rank: #380,069 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #40 in Books > Medical Books > Medicine > Surgery > Trauma #182 in Books > Textbooks > Medicine & Health Sciences > Medicine > Special Topics > History #363 in Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Psychology > Neuropsychology

## **Customer Reviews**

Winner of the 2010 William A. Douglass Prize for Best Book in Europeanist Anthropology, Society for the Anthropology of Europe/American Anthropological Association "A model contribution to this collective effort at understanding and mitigating the world's misery. . . . [This] calm and mighty book

is no less than a staccato history of military and civilian suffering since 1914. . . . Splendid."--Fred Inglis, *Times Higher Education*"A must read for those interested in trauma, this book looks at the ubiquity of trauma and the development of a new vocabulary and discourse of traumatic events."--A.N. Douglas, *Choice*"[A]s Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman elegantly describe in their new book, . . . what has happened is nothing less than a fundamental change in what it means to be 'traumatised'. . . . [M]ental health professionals never seem far away from either challenge or crisis, which is why the work is so demanding but also stimulating and never dull. Much the same is true of *Empire of Trauma*."--Simon Wessely, *British Medical Journal*"A model of social inquiry, *The Empire of Trauma* is a major contribution not only to our understanding of trauma and the nature of victimhood but to our purchase on the times in which we live."--Joseph E. Davis, *Canadian Journal of Sociology*"This is an unusual book for the psychiatric bookshelf, because the authors seek to stand free of the scientific facts altogether and to ask simply what impact the emergence of the trauma narrative has had upon the world. This, they argue, is the anthropological stance: to ask how ideas emerge in a society and come to be seen as true, and what follows from that truth, without asking whether those ideas are in fact true. Because of this stance, the book will be read as provocative; but it should be read, because the authors have something to say."--Tanya M. Luhrmann, *American Journal of Psychiatry*"*The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood* makes a signal contribution to the genre of 'the history of the present'. . . . The detail and finesse with which theory and data are woven together for each case makes this book compelling. . . . [I]n indeed, a splendid achievement."--Veena Das, *American Journal of Sociology*"[T]his book presents a well-reasoned discourse on the concepts of trauma, trauma-related disorders, treatment and their relationships to social, political and economic considerations. It will appeal to scholars in a number of disciplines including anthropology, psychiatry, psychology, history and sociology."--Shameran Slewa-Younan, *Metascience*

"An enormous achievement. *The Empire of Trauma* offers not only an understanding of the anthropology of the concept of trauma in general, but also a very interesting discussion of the development of values and value systems in our globalized world. This is one of the best books I have read in a long time on the issue of trauma."--David Becker, *Free University Berlin*"*The Empire of Trauma* is a nuanced study of the complex and contradictory histories of practices and debates within psychiatry, military medicine, psychoanalysis, political activism, and international humanitarianism. It is a much-needed reflection on the overwhelming hegemony of discourses of trauma and reparation, one that does not dismiss the reality of the experience, but instead aims at

clearing a space where the painful utterance may reclaim its evocative force and its effectiveness, and may be heard once again."--Stefania Pandolfo, University of California, Berkeley

When I studied anthropology at the University of Chicago, there was a lot of distrust among the faculty for the work of Michel Foucault. Jean Comaroff, for one, recommended that I read a certain work because it was an "English reading of Foucault." I had to tell her that an English reading of Foucault did not, in fact, exist. Why? At that time, a good English translation of Foucault or, in fact, even a good translation of a French scholar who worked in a Foucaultian vein, did not exist. Thus, there was no "English reading of Foucault" to be had. Now there is. Now there is *The Empire of Trauma*. I hope that Jean will take note. At the University of Chicago, even the great historical anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, who historicized Levi-Strauss, had contempt for Foucault. See, for example, Sahlins' "Waiting for Foucault," the title being a take off on Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot." Why was Sahlins contemptuous of Foucault? Perhaps because Sahlins, despite his disavowal of historical materialist methodology--see, for example, his reading of Mintz in "The Sadness of Sweetness"--still employs methods that can be likened to dialectics. After all, like Levi-Strauss, Sahlins is a fan of dualisms. Foucault said of Marxism/dialectics that it/they can only breathe in the nineteenth century. Elsewhere, it/they is/are a fish out of water. We need to read Sahlins and his conceptual arsenal in this light. This book, *The Empire of Trauma*, is a good start. What of work in the social sciences in the United States that did not/does not have contempt for Foucault? There is a whole industry of work on "governmentality" based on Foucault's later lectures at the College de France in the United States. Unfortunately, this North American academic factory/industry, like Foucault's work on governmentality, just puts forth outdated versions of demographic transition theory. Without even good neoclassical critique. That's what is taking place in the US today in the social sciences. Unless you are a demographer, you don't have a demographic imagination. And so your lack of a demographic imagination gives you an uncritical reading of Foucault, a reading that relies on the worst of his heuristic devices. This book, *The Empire of Trauma*, is not such a reading of Foucault. This book relies on the best of Foucault. Scholars of governmentality, please take note. Fassin and company look at the notion of trauma and what they call the dual genealogy of concepts and practices of trauma and victimhood. One of the book's subjects is French psychiatry's "discovery of new patients and subjects" through Medecins sans frontieres and Medecins du monde; and by Jacques Chirac's sending psychiatrists to the scene for bombings that took place in Paris when he was in office. Through this prism, we can start to analyze what happens when psychiatry in other countries besides France makes a land grab for

new subjects. For example, consider the state of psychiatry in Buenos Aires. There are rich residents of Buenos Aires who have stepped out of a Bunuel film inasmuch as they actually take their analysts with them to swank resorts on vacation. Then again, there was recently a report in the International Herald Tribune that said that psychiatry in Argentina is turning away from the couch and toward pharmacology. Maybe that's why the analysts are at the beach...:-) All of this and more are food for thought to be read through the analytic lens provided by Fassin and his co-authors.

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