

Résumé du contenu/English Summary

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Regards sur la victime

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RÉSUMÉ DU CONTENU / ENGLISH SUMMARY

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Thirty years ago, in 1949, the term « victimology » (from victim, and the Greek logos : discourse) was introduced for the first time in the scientific language of criminology. In his book, *The Show of Violence*, the American psychiatrist F. Wertham speaks of the need for a « science of victimology ».

The victim of murder, he writes, is forgotten. In the dramatic discussions about the abnormal psychology of the murderer, no reference is made to the lack of protection of the victim and the responsibility of the authorities on his behalf. The psychology of the assassin cannot be understood if we do not understand the sociology of the victim. What we need is a science of victimology.

As these studies show, three decades later victimology has become one of the most important branches of criminological science. What factors were responsible for such a rapid evolution ?

The social sciences have shown that human behaviour cannot be isolated from the situation that engendered it, and that the analysis of the causes of this behaviour must take into account all the elements that created the situation and conditioned the person's acting out. Thus the actor, the victim and the situation form a trinity, a structure which cannot be separately studied without changing its nature. The fact that the delinquent is only one of the two parties involved in a crime is often forgotten. He, the victim and the situation prior to the crime are three elements that are so interdependent that it is impossible to understand one without the others.

Victimological studies, like the other side of the coin, are similar to those that have already occupied criminology, only that instead of the aggressor, it is the victim that is the subject of study. Research on the genesis of victimization, as on that of criminality, examines the bio-psycho-social mechanisms that lead a person, group or category of persons (races, nations) to become the victims of criminal aggression. Typological studies will establish the susceptibility of these psycho-social or socio-cultural types to victimization. Just as criminologists sought to discover the extent of crime by examining the black number, studies on

victimization have a similar objective. They have so far proved so promising that a number of governments, such as those of the United States and Canada, have instituted periodic enquiries. In this way it is hoped to get a clearer picture of the impact of crime in society. The substantial article by Ezzat A. Fattah, to whom, incidentally, we owe the initiative for this issue, gives an up-to-date account of the trends in research on victims of aggression.

Studies devoted to the criminal generally project a certain bio-psycho-social silhouette, and it is the same for studies devoted to the victim. We particularly note that women are specific victims; like the Jews, they are the object of aggression and discrimination whose origins are complex but whose effects are obvious. As shown in the articles of Renée Collette-Carrière and H. F. Ellenberger, they constitute a social category that is particularly vulnerable.

From the point of view of crime policy, victimological studies contribute significantly to the preventive model, bringing up the question of compensation for victims of criminal acts, either in kind (restitution) or in financial terms (damages and interest). The victim, reduced to the role of a mere witness during the criminal trial, becomes the central figure for the major organizations that make up the public compensation services. As Alice Parizeau indicates, these services are increasingly becoming components of the criminal justice system and are, without question, its least controversial element. According to Micheline Baril, by taking cognizance of the « evidence » of small businessmen, it is easy to understand the political support given by governments to the development of these services. Ever forgotten in the proceedings between the justice system and the aggressors, the predators of all kinds who take advantage of the weak or the inefficiency of the protection systems, the victim finally escapes the indifference to his fate, thanks to acknowledgement of the State's responsibility for the protection of its citizens.

Public reaction over the past ten years against the inhumanity of the all but totalitarian bureaucracies is behind the efforts to have the victim play a more active role in the criminal trial. The important thing about the restitution programmes that are emerging all over the world, and in Quebec as well, is that by « personalizing » the penalty, it is hoped to have the delinquent

take upon himself the responsibility he has incurred vis-a-vis his victim.

As D. Cressey noted at the IVth International Symposium on Victimology, held in September 1979 at Münster, Westphalia, « victimology » should be aware of the risk of adding « logy » to a noun, thus giving it the semblance of consistency with a field of studies that we refuse to consider autonomous. Victimology is undoubtedly a very important part of criminology ; but it is only that. To extend it to victims of natural catastrophes, wars, etc., would be to emasculate it forever. On reading the present issue, the most skeptical will be convinced of the increasing role of victimological studies in criminology and of the value of its approach for designing criminal policy, particularly in the area of prevention. This in itself is a mission that should satisfy the highest ambitions of criminologists, « victimologists », in future years.