INTRODUCTION

Sacrificial Victims: Sigmund Freud, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer

To say that we have been living in and as a “victim society” (“société victimale”) in the West for the last few decades is, by any measure, a bold assertion.¹ The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, who uses this audacious phrase off-handedly, does not really specify what it means in his interview in *Paroxysme* (*Le Paroxyste indifférént*, 1997). This is, however, not just an ageing *philosophe’s* curmudgeonly ratiocination or a vacuous, millennial slogan. A persistent anxiety about victims and victimhood has been present in a variety of cultural manifestations over the past thirty years.

In the context of the interview, the Frenchman implies two things about this “victim society.”² First, his phrase suggests continuity within the broken temporality of modernity.³ Baudrillard’s concern with the Western self-perception as victim, irrespective of any concrete harm, reaches back into the early nineteenth century. It transcends the fixation on the new, the innovative, and the radical break we have come to associate with everything modern. Second, Baudrillard intimates that the perception of victimhood has undergone a kind of diffusion and intensification today. It is far more widespread than it once was and encompasses society in its entirety rather than particular groups (33).

In the English translation, Baudrillard’s arresting expression is carefully separated from the remainder of the text within single ‘scare’ quotes. In this manner, emphasis and distance are simultaneously signaled. Both strike me as appropriate—there is something powerful but nonetheless counterintuitive about his neologistic concept. Common sense indicates that the West is still, in economic and political terms, in a position of superior power and, if anything, victimizer rather than victim. The sense of being victims could, perhaps, be the prerogative of distinct groups or individuals within the West (such as women, ethnic minorities, postcolonial subjects, or homosexuals), but certainly should not be that of society as a whole.
This book is about why many authors, filmmakers, artists, and philosophers in Europe share Baudrillard's sense that we have become a "société victime." More to the point, it is about how their cultural anxiety expresses itself; about how such rhetoric sometimes criticizes itself; and, above all, how victim talk perpetuates itself in the very moment that the ground seems to be pulled from beneath it.

I

In order to systematically elaborate the meanings of the term "victim," I would like to start my inquiry from the multivalent dictionary definition of "victim." The Oxford English Dictionary's continued acceptance as an impartial standard helps map a kind of changing consensus regarding the word's meaning. The primary definition of "victim" relates the word either to the pagan sacrificial ritual ("1.a. a living creature killed and offered as a sacrifice to some deity or supernatural power") or the Christian religious context ("b. applied to Christ as an offering for mankind"). Although this entry is etymologically anterior to the others in the list and hence is given pride of place, this first definition seems to have long ceded ground to the supposedly secondary and tertiary meanings of "victim" (607). The definition for "victim" under 2.a. also does not pertain to the intangible sense of victimhood to which Baudrillard alludes: "A person who is put to death or subjected to torture by another; one who suffers severely in body or property through cruel or oppressive treatment." Rather, those clarifications revolving around a more abstracted sense of injury under later subheadings seem relevant for our purposes. Indeed, definition 2.b., which speaks of a victim as "one who is reduced or destined to suffer under some oppressive or destructive agency," and 2.c., which mentions that a victim "perishes or suffers in health" because of "some enterprise or pursuit voluntarily undertaken," are particularly germane. Definition 2.b. points to the diminution ("reduction") or impoverishment of the self in many contemporary victim narratives—psychological suffering abrogates the full unfolding of the self. The impersonal nature of the experience is, with the OED's general formulation, inadvertently moved to the center of our attention: in many victim narratives, harm arises from either unidentified or non-localizable institutions of "destructive agency." Definition 2.c. indicates that the feeling of victimization at the hands of an indistinct, anonymous entity arises within the context of the greatest possible freedom of choice ("voluntarily undertaken"). After 2.b. and 2.c., where a type of predestination toward suffering comes into conflict with an element of willed self-harm (which suggests that either definition applies, but not both together), we arrive at the third definition of "victim" in "the phrase to pull a victim to (some thing or person)," which seems to run counter to definition 2.c., with its emphasis on human volition. Definition 3 introduces passivity into victimhood or reintroduces it, if we take 2.b. to
mean passivity as well. The element of decision-making in pursuing an activity that leads to harm is not a factor in this final definition. Without further elaboration, the last phrase suggests either the inexorability of fate or the contingency of chance, and it may corroborate the “destiny” implicit in definition 2.b. All definitions, ambiguous and contradictory as they are, pertain to the contemporary impression of victimhood at issue in this book. Most surprisingly, definition 1—with its cultic overtones and its allusions to the sacred—remains applicable. It actually still holds pre-eminence in the logic underpinning the generalized perception of victimhood that I discuss.

Baudrillard, however, does not focus exclusively on this one aspect; rather, he creates the adjective “victimale” in French to activate the various clashing meanings of “victim.” For him, ubiquitous victimhood comes into being as a result of global forces, where events succeed one another without historical meaning, the social realm is liquidated as a political factor, and all differences become irrelevant (Paroxysm 8–11). Baudrillard is, as I have indicated, not alone. He shares this view—with different inflections and emphases of course—with an impressive set of people: the French literary critic René Girard, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, the Austrian director Michael Haneke, his fellow national, the writer Christoph Ransmayr, the German painter Anselm Kiefer, the Austrian literary doyenne, Friederike Mayröcker, the French best-selling author Michel Houellebecq, and, finally, the Austrian Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek. These are, in my view, some of the most important artists and thinkers in Europe reflecting upon victimhood at the moment (with the exception of Girard, based at Stanford), and their concern warrants close attention. If I fall into a kind of ventriloquism at times, speaking in the first-person plural from the viewpoint of their respective victims, it is to show the rhetorical persuasiveness of this ethically complex speaking position.

Although this book began as an in-depth study about the conditions and forms of victim discourse within the spatially and temporally circumscribed confines of post-war Austria, it quickly became apparent to me that subtle permutations of victim rhetoric were not limited to the small republic, struggling in the 1980s to come to terms with the repercussions of its foundational “myth” as Hitler’s first victim during the Anschluss. Indeed, stumbling across Baudrillard’s eye-catching phrase, I realized that the circle had to have a greater radius; that the uses to which victim rhetoric was being put—in often highly sophisticated fashion—were geographically spread, with an older lineage than 1943 (the year of the Moscow Declaration, in which the Allies set Austria-as-victim down in writing). So my inquiry broadened, as I tried to make sense of the millennial appeal to victimhood I encountered in widely divergent works and texts. Victim status, rather than being shunned per se, appears as a means to create a tenuous affiliation within a radically atomized society, that is, when Robert Musil’s modern “man without qualities” has become the paradigmatic exemplar of contemporary humanity. It gains a particular foothold—as a popular
discourse pervading all kinds of cultural manifestations in Western Europe—
in the period after 1968 (as Baudrillard himself suggests throughout
Paranome and in The Transparency of Evil [3–13]).

I begin by asking how stricter definitions of victims in criminology
foreshadow the development toward a “victim society.” In the remainder
of the introduction, I also look at the sacrificial victim narratives that
come to the fore in Sigmund Freud’s and Theodor Adorno and
Max Horkheimer’s theoretical reflections on “victim society.” How is
sacrifice and victimage intrinsic to the construction of empowered victims
(see def. 1.a.)? In what manner do these thinkers conceive of the sense of
victimhood as being endemic to society, and how is it related to questions
of substitution? The spread of victim society also broaches the question of
affective involvement, to which I turn in chapter 1. Here I discuss works
such as René Girard’s Violence and the Sacred (La violence et le sacré, 1972)
or Peter Sloterdijk’s The Concept of the Masses (Die Verachtung der
Massen, 2000), where the psycho-social effects that victimhood generates
in individuals and in groups within mass society and in mass-mediated soci-
ety are explored. In the latter regard, Sloterdijk’s narratives on society’s
‘soft differences’ and Michael Haneke’s films, particularly his Benny’s Video
(1992), become relevant in chapter 2. Indeed, for all of the men so far,
victimhood is intimately related to and dependent on violence, and Haneke
delves into the relationship between victim society’s paradoxically inclusive-
exclusive relation to violence and the dissemination of images of suffering.
Where violence subtends all human interactions—where, for example,
National Socialism produces an atemporal narrative of extreme human
victimization—the issue arises whether violence is given a transcendentally
‘spin’ and hence brings with it redemption (LaCapra, History 144–55). For
this reason, I am concerned with whether or not the sacred returns in rhet-
oric highlighting or even aggrandizing violence, even when directed
against the self. Must a discourse of victimhood inevitably give rise to apo-
calyptic or exculpatory narratives?—I ask in chapter 3. Here I discuss Anselm
Kiefer’s Cosmos and Star Paintings of the mid-1990s onward, as they dove-
tail with the concerns Christoph Ransmayr brings to the fore in his biogra-
phical essay on the painter, “The Unborn” (“Der Ungeborene,” 2001), and
his prose poem, Resplendent Decline (Straßbender Untergang, 1982).

Because so many of these works—in particular Kiefer and Ransmayr’s—
are profoundly melancholy, I return to the strict Freudian sense of this
adjective to ponder the relationship between victimhood, melancholia, and
tradition in the brief chapter 4. This marks the transition to the second half
of this book, where I look at solutions to “victim society.” Why is the victim
in Freud’s seminal account of melancholia feminized, psychically impover-
ished, and beheld to a replay loop that suggests stasis? For Friederike
Mayrücken, particularly in her novel The Communicating Vessels (Die
kommunizierenden Gefässe, 2003), there seems to be a gendered resolution
INTRODUCTION

possible to the melancholic fixity and eternal repetition of such a speaking position in the very reduction of the ego we encountered in definition 2.b. In chapter 5, we see how she counters an aggressively paternalistic tradition with an art of impoverishment. Peripheral in Mayröcker's work (in its concern with material superabundance), but more significantly elsewhere, unease with consumer society coincides with the stress on voluntary victimization and anonymous agencies of harm in Western-style democracies (def. 2.c.). We are led to wonder: do consumer individualism and the pluralization of possibilities lead to the reduction of humans to a bare, undifferentiated form of life, along the lines Giorgio Agamben has proposed in Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Homo sacer: Il potere sovrano e la nuda vita, 1995)? Once this hyperbolic state has been reached, it may become possible to transcend the conditions of victimization. I follow up on these questions in the controversial works of the French author Michel Houellebecq, looking closely at his Whatever (Extension du domaine de la lutte, 1994) and The Elementary Particles (Les particules élémentaires, 1998) in chapter 6. Where may a strategy of hyperbolic identification with victims begin and what are its possible post-traumatic effects? In conclusion, I examine Elfriede Jelinek's post-dramatic works with emphasis on A Sport Play (Ein Sportstück, 1998). Her extreme rhetoric of victimhood inevitably calls attention to victim society's ungrounded grounds.

II

The topic of victims has long been broached in legal studies and even spawned its own sub-discipline in criminology. For reasons I intimate later, the definitive distinctions these fields require are far removed from the welcome ambiguities of the cultural realm. Nonetheless, some points they raise merit our attention here. Precisely because they distill difficult issues down to a raw essence, the problems confronting us with the phrase "victim society" emerge all the more clearly.

In Victimology: The Victim and the Criminal Justice Process, which discusses the importance of stringent definitions of victimhood in the legal realm, Sandra Walklate argues that the status of victim is something to be "achieved" through the complete absence of acts leading to harm on the victim's part. Victim status pertains in those cases in which our own behavior does not "contribute to or exacerbate our victimization" (xii). In this instance, the definition of the word "victim" under OED, point 2.c. is challenged; it matters how one arrives at a self-definition as victim, since the non-willed nature of victimhood is paramount. Only a pursuit involuntarily undertaken contains the potential to confer legitimate victim status. As Walklate explains, this is particularly important because the definition of victimization is always at issue in criminal cases of rape, to name the best-known example. Where women are subjected to physical injury, they may
be blamed for being victims who bring harm on themselves (the infamous “victim precipitation” argument, 3-4). Walklate indicates that social and, by extension, juridical legitimacy is essential when someone defines herself as a victim, especially in cases involving physical acts. I would like to inquire into the reasons why someone might conceive of him- or herself as a victim outside of physical, psychological, or material harm that can be prosecuted in a court. While the examples I discuss are about acquiring legitimacy or lacking it, they are not concerned with the domain of jurisprudence, but with the social world, where an ethical legitimacy is in question. The assumption of victim status may be correlative to an unassailable high ground, when others believe that this status has been rightly “achieved.”

Perhaps the burgeoning interest in victimology—the study of victims, their typology and social status, as well as the asymmetrical relationships and differential power relations between victims and victimizers—in the post-war period is a first step toward a “victim society,” in which neat delineations between victims and victimizers are called into question. Victimology itself begins with works such as that of criminologist Hans von Hentig, who in his seminal book, The Criminal and His Victim (1948), attempts to classify victims according to character traits that would make them more or less prone to being killed. Von Hentig gives contour to the partially responsible victim, and his cast includes depressive, acquisitive, wanton, and lonesome types, who precipitate their misfortune (4:19-38). With the shift to the prospective victim who is at least partially culpable for any future injury, victimology takes on an anticipatory dimension. It speaks in a future anterior, where a person is made responsible for a victimization that has not yet occurred. Once the viewpoint that a hapless person could instigate his or her plight gains credence, it seems a small progression from the innocent victim to a paradoxically guilty one.

Baudrillard’s assertion in Paradoxsm that we are today living as a “victim society” suggests that the potential of becoming or, in some form, being a victim has been internalized, together with the guilt for letting it be so. He generalizes from the paradoxically guilty individual to the body politic where all members, regardless of wealth, station, education, creed, color, and so on, can potentially see themselves as victims. Baudrillard clearly links his neologism to a “new sentimental order” (“le nouvel ordre sentimental” [33]), a phrase also placed in scare quotes in the English translation, which in turn is meant to resonate with an earlier essay, “The New Victim Order” (“Le Nouvel Ordre Victimal,” see note 2). What he allusively describes for this society and this new regime is a kind of affective fall-out from the processes of modernization, including the Industrial Revolution and colonization, in which emotions such as guilt figure prominently. While he thus gives “victim society” an older lineage (in which
Nietzsche plays an important role) than the one I describe here, he maintains that we have reached a particularly acute phase in the late twentieth and incipient twenty-first centuries. The “paroxystic phase” (“la phase paroxystique”) insinuates the priority of an emotional economy, where there is a strong dissatisfaction with the status quo. For thirty years, he claims, we have been living in a de-differentiated, indifferent phase where there are no more guarantees for belonging: “It’s a kind of horizontal field in which everyone must find their mark” (15) (“C’est un espace de champ horizontal où chacun doit trouver sa marque” [33–34]). It seems that the problem lies in the loss of fixed hierarchies, of vertical coordinates: Westerners futilely try to inscribe themselves in a field of social relations where there are no fixed points. The assumption of victim status here becomes important because it seems to guarantee our emplacement; however, it has, in Baudrillard’s opinion, not been legitimately “achieved.” A generalized “victim society” occurs concomitantly—I am hesitant to relate it in any causative or chronological manner—with the progressive questioning, or as Baudrillard would say evacuation, of historical continuity (15–16). When the sense of oneself as a historical being has become equivocal (for history would seem to provide another resistant frame of reference), there is a willingness to interpret psychological and physical harm that has occurred in a new manner. Certain victims, such as the Jewish victims of Nazism, risk becoming some victims among many. They are compared, for example, to victims of Stalinism (see the German Historians’ Debate, or Historikerstreit, in the mid-1980s in Germany). In other instances, where the effort is made to reinstate historical meaning to counter the threat of amnesia, emphasis may be placed on other victims—such as German civilians in Allied bombing campaigns—who for a long time were discounted due to socio-political considerations and fears of quantitative tallying.

With these examples I touch on some of the dangers inherent in attempts to analyze the proliferation of discourse surrounding victimhood: we run the risk of seeming insensitive to the claims of those who have been historically injured, where material and physical claims cannot be separated from psychological ones. Qualitative considerations quickly seem quantitative, with one victim being counted against another. Law professor Martha Minnow, discussing some of the developments I outline cursorily earlier, also mentions the potential pitfalls of talking about “victim talk” (1412). In an article for the UCLA Law Review from 1993, she argues that one may seem to be aligning oneself with a vengeful, conservative crowd that would stress the victim’s rights (relying on subjective testimonials) over against any exculpatory narratives on behalf of criminals. While her interest also lies in the effects of the victims’ rights movements on sentencing in the United States of America, she is more concerned with a new mode of discourse that actually reverses “victim blaming.” She takes to task this strategic
reversal. Hentig’s 1948 book is characteristic of an earlier moment with respect to the developments Minnow outlines. He actively sought to focus the spotlight on the victims’ dyadic relationship to perpetrators in an effort to complicate crude scenarios allocating guilt. The current tactic of willingly embracing victim status is, for Minnow, an attempt to simplify complex social interactions and arrest dialogue about issues such as compassion or entitlement (1432).16 As we will see, there is a socially “rebounding quality” to the subjective accounts of hurt that are set against one another (1417–28). In the place of dialogue one finds formulaic, ritualized exchanges, where testimonials become incontrovertible evidence. The sense of victimization that is espoused and expounded does not engender agency (Minnow offers honor duels in the antebellum South as a counterpoint). The embrace of victimhood erases human volition and enshrines the passivity we encountered under OED definition number three. In this regard, the escalating blame games she describes take on an almost tragic, stichomythic rhythm. In the leveling of all differences that ensue, Minnow fears the loss of differentiated narratives of victimhood that are grounded in particular, socio-economic, and historical accounts (1429–31, 1437).17 It is such differentiation, with corresponding symmetrical as well as asymmetrical relations between victims and victimizing agencies, which makes the victim narratives I look at particularly interesting. In the main, intricacy, subtlety, and beauty characterize the texts and art works I examine, which largely avoid the pitfalls of more overtly juridical and political “victim talk.” However, I should mention the following at the outset. In steering clear of neat delineations between right and wrong, good and evil, they generally also engage in a rhetoric of victimhood at a remove from specific historical considerations.

III

While Minnow’s answer to the political, legal, and social issues she raises is optimistic (she urges us to espouse complexity against simplicity), she is aware of how important the manner of articulation is: it matters how we tell our stories of victimization (1432).18 I, too, commence this book inquiring into the kinds of narratives that are common in the presentation or self-presentation as victim. Psychoanalytic accounts, in particular, are dependent on a victim scenario (Dever 1–6). It should come as no surprise that the spread of depth psychology today, often in bedraggled, popularized form, makes it a repository of stock victim narratives (chapter 2).19 Leaving this popularization aside for the moment, we can argue that Freud’s questionable contributions to natural science are more than compensated for by his vast importance to wide-ranging philosophical and cultural issues of the sort I discuss here (Levine 1–9).

To gain an insight into the centrality of victimhood for Freud’s writing, a glance at the Concordance to The Standard Edition of the Complete
Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud is helpful: it lists eighty-seven entries for the term “victim” in the psychoanalyst’s oeuvre (Guttmann 403–04). There is an additional entry in the English Concordance for Freud’s quotation containing the French variant “victimes” in The Interpretation of Dreams (4: 60). A perusal of the list, which gives fragments of the sentences in which “victim” is embedded, makes clear that the word generally occurs in one of four sometimes overlapping contexts, roughly matching the subdivisions of the OED definitions discussed earlier. First, it appears in the generally accepted usage for someone who has—presumably through no fault of his own—suffered harm that comes from the outside. This corresponds to the OED definition 2.a., “one who suffers severely in body or property through cruel or oppressive treatment.” Such phrases as “the person who is the victim of the injury, pain” (Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, 8: 230), or “who had himself been the victim of an earlier seduction” (Heredity and the Aetiology of the Neuroses, 3: 152) belong to this category. Second, it is used in a more abstract sense to refer to someone who is prey to his own hurtful inner workings and corresponds to OED definition 2.b. dealing with a “destructive agency.” To this latter group belong such statements as “a neurosis should make its victim asocial” (Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, 18: 142) or “she fell a victim to a splitting of her mind” (Autobiographical Study, 20: 31). Third, we find the OED definition number 3, the phrase “to fall a victim to” in various contexts, which is not always separable from the other definitions mentioned earlier. “Victim” is pronouncedly used in this manner in two of the three phrases containing the pronoun “I.” These instances, as the marginal annotations in the Concordance show, occur in Freud’s early work, The Interpretation of Dreams (1900). There he describes himself as a diligent medical student who is the “constant victim of an impulse” to learn only from monographs, and he portrays his surname as a “victim of feeble witticisms” (4: 172; 4: 207). It is also used in this rather colloquial way when talk is of drives, instincts, or wishes undergoing repression (wishes that have fallen victim to repression,” Interpretation 4: 244; “sexual life that must fall a victim to repression,” Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis 10: 248).

However, what strikes me after this survey is the recurrence of the first dictionary definition of the word “victim,” relating to the concept of pagan or monotheistic sacrifice. Only in its etymological allusion to the Latin “victima” does the English word “victim” recall this definition, which seems furthest from any understanding today. This connection to sacrifice arises from the dual meaning of the German word for “victim”; in Freud’s native tongue, an “Opfer” is also a “sacrifice.” For this reason, the German Konkordanz—which I have avoided simply for the English-speaking reader’s case, but with which the aforementioned points could have been equally easily made—lists 132 occurrences of the term “Opfer,” a singular and plural
noun (Guttman 4038). In the English version, “victim” and “victims” is coupled with “sacrifice” and “sacrificial” nine times in Freud’s writings.22 Three more times mention of the “animal victim” makes apparent that sacrifice is at issue. It is further present, if we include the “sacrosanct victim” of the “holy mystery” in ritual killing (Totem and Taboo 13: 134; 137;147;149). This frequency, the reader may have guessed, is due to two significant Freudian texts separated by a quarter of a century: Totem and Taboo (Totem und Tabu) from 1912/1913 and, to a lesser extent, Moses and Monotheism (Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion), published 1939 in its entirety only after Freud had fled National Socialist Vienna for London.23 In both sets of essays, Freud broaches the question of human communality under prevailing conditions of adversity. The distance between Freud’s sacrificial victim and Baudrillard’s victimized society is smaller than may appear. Indeed, Freud’s attempt to describe the affective condition of a generalized victimhood bears affinities to the intangible psycho-social malaise that Baudrillard describes with his locution “victim society.” An element of sacrificial rhetoric remains present in the contemporary usage of the term. It is also from sacrifice’s ambivalence that the picture of concomitantly aggressive and innocently guilty victim emerges.

By starting his perorations on sacrifice at the beginning of Part IV, section four in Totem and Taboo with an explicit definition of “Opfer,” Freud himself suggests that the double meaning of “Opfer” is central to an understanding of all abstracted victim narratives (13: 121–94).24 He carefully stresses its meaning as sacred “sacrificium,” noting that the non-religious usage followed from the subordinate meanings of “Opfer” (13: 161–62). Freud envisions mankind’s original victimization culminating in the primal murder in the infamous fifth section on “The Infantile Return of Totemism” (“Die infantile Wiederkehr des Totemismus”) with his customary caveats preceding and following his dramatic reconstruction: “Let us call up the spectacle of a totem meal […] ” (13: 140).25 Drawing on the anthropological, archaeological, and socio-historical studies he has cited earlier, Freud audaciously describes the first cannibalistic feast on which all human progress comes to depend. In order to explain the features of exogamy and totemic ambivalence in ‘primitive societies’ and in more ‘advanced’ cultures, Freud imagines—drawing on a mélange of Charles Darwin, James Atkinson, James Frazer, Johann Jakob Bachofen, and particularly William Robertson Smith for inspiration—the sons’ slaying of the tyrannical, all-powerful, sexually omnipotent father. The primal horde’s retrospective apotheosis of the father articulates itself in all later permutations of the initial feast, when the sons devour the dead elder to incorporate his strength. Momentary alliance (“verbünden[n]”) is necessary to overwhelm and overcome (“überwältigen”) the dominant father. As a result of the overturning of their conditions of victimization, the sons can found a new order. The “rescuing of” and “fortifying “organization”
("die Organisation, welche sie stark gemacht hatte" [9: 174]), which transforms them from “pitiful” and “hapless” victims into “strong” victims, is the necessary by-product of their successful revolt.26

We do not have to subscribe to Freud’s reconstruction of “mankind’s earliest festival” (13: 142) (“das erste Fest der Menschlichkeit” [9: 172]) to construct a viable theory of victimhood with relevance today. It has become a commonplace in literature on Freud to lament the speciousness of the anthropological research, the apparent Lamarckism underpinning his view of inherited, collective guilt, and the fallacious Darwinism of patriarchal hordes.27 These problems can be taken for granted and Freud’s theory nonetheless moved from the realm of historical to psychic reality, as Peter Gay and other scholars advocate.28 This would be in keeping with Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi’s assertion about Totem and Taboo: “Freud did not have to be a historian, for the pivotal event it presupposes does not really have to take place in historical time. It would be as absurd to ask Freud to date the primal patricide as it would be to inquire in what year Cain murdered Abel, the primal fratricide” (21). The anthropologist Robert Paul, who has devoted a monograph to the parallels between Freud’s genetic myth as it is elaborated upon in Moses and Monotheism and the Torah, has also convincingly argued that we can retrace Freud’s reasoning without making his wrong turns. If we do so, we can see how “cultural symbol systems” and “individual psychodynamic constellations” inform one another in a “dialectical, mutually constitutive process” (5).

When we interpret Freud’s society of victims and victimizers in Totem and Taboo as a psychical construction accounting for the dynamics of human fellowship, sacrificial victimage—the condition of being a victim as well as the practice of seeking out a symbolic victim for purposes of expiation (OED: Additions 297)—becomes the necessary precondition for society’s development. Victimization of numerous, competing individuals occurs at the hands of a superior agent, who is feared, envied, and admired for the very power with which he subjugates others. He represents the “destructive agency” we encountered in the OED definition 2.b. This victimizer can only be overcome if many share the sense of victimization. Freud’s story places emotional ambivalence—where fear, envy, admiration, and love coexist—at an imaginary beginning, where a sense of community through victimhood arises. The victims must make common cause, using some “cultural advance” (“Kulturfortschritt” [9: 171]), to overcome their maltreatment (13: 141). Freud distinguishes his idea of Hegelian progress through the sublation of victimhood into a higher kind of self-victimization from the cyclical Opfer that Atkinson describes in primal hordes.29 Atkinson’s conception of victimhood frustrates Freud in its inability to go beyond a vision of eternal violence and chaos, as a telling footnote indicates. The psychoanalyst’s comments on Atkinson are formulated in an exasperated German subjunctive, of which I offer my own translation: “In this manner,
no new organization of society would ever come into existence [...]” (13: 142 n.1) (“Auf diese Weise käme eine neue Organisation der Gesellschaft niemals zustande [...]” [9: 172 n.1]). Freud’s dialectic, on the other hand, is efficacious, even if only to be had at a price. Progress, in the form of new weapons technology and a concomitant “feeling of superiority” (“Gefühl der Überlegenheit” [9: 171]), precedes the overturning of victimhood and in turn enables other progress—social organization and moral obligations (13: 141–42). The sacrificial dynamic, with its foundational violence, becomes the motor of cultural development and solidarity. This is the case especially after the guilt for having killed the father is internalized, which leads to a form of life predicated on self-reparative acts. The primal father dematerializes almost instantly in Freud’s account, with his literal incorporation and then metaphorical internalization as guilt-inducing super-ego, and he finds later reincarnations in a variety of mortal and immortal guises. In this way today’s profane meaning of the word Opfer emerges from a discussion of the origin of religion: the sacrificial victim becomes the ground for all social functioning, reliant as this is on the denial of unfettered desire. The question will arise, in the course of this book, what happens when desire is entirely liberated and its denial no longer a requisite moment in societal functioning, above all post-1968. Such a socio-libidinal sea change invariably will inflect the perception of victims and sacrifice.

For the moment, however, let us remain with Freud’s text: over against the private property and individualism of capitalism, Freud envisions an early communal order based on sacrifice in Totem. It is worth noting the generally positive coding of the scene of victimization and the ritualistic order that defines the society founded on violence. Sociability within the “company of brothers” (13: 142), or “Bruderschär,” is only one permutation of other possible consortia of men, the “Männervorlagen” (9: 171–72). In the German original, Freud places particular emphasis on the solidarity founded through sacrificial actions. Because translator James Strachey leaves out Freud’s stress, I will retranslate the passage here: “The sacrifice was, as can be proven, at first nothing other than ‘an act of social fellowship between the deity and his worshippers,’ an act of sociability, a communion of the believers with their god” (“Das Opfer war nachweisbar zuerst nichts anderes als ,an act of social fellowship between the deity and his worshippers’, ein Akt der Geselligkeit, eine Kommunion der Gläubigen mit ihrem Gotte” [9: 162]). Freud’s quotation of the English, followed by his own translation into German, and by a second rephrasing all serve to emphasize his larger preoccupation with communality based on victimhood. A whole complex of words returns over and over again to the idea of a collective, ranging from the shared nature of the sacrifices just mentioned (13: 133), to the commensal meal (13: 134), and the act of communion in Christian mass (13: 155). Freud’s usage of Darwin’s theory of evolution...
is a further hint that the “communism”—to employ Darwin’s and Atkinson’s overdetermined expression—inherent in Opfer is at issue in Totem and Taboo. Before speaking of parricide in the closing chapter, Freud quotes from the German translation of The Descent of Man (1871) at length, in which Darwin (in turn citing Dr. Savage in the Boston Journal of Natural History) discusses male jealousy and competition in the animal kingdom. For Darwin, the powerful affect of jealousy leads him to doubt that absolute promiscuity was ever likely:

Therefore, if we look far enough back in the stream of time, ... judging from the social habits of man as he now exists ... the most probable view is that primaeval man aboriginally lived in small communities, each with as many wives as he could support and obtain, whom he would have jealously guarded against all other men. Or he may have lived with several wives by himself, like the Gorilla; for all the natives “agree that but one adult male is seen in a band; when the young male grows up, a contest takes place for mastery, and the strongest, by killing and driving out the others, establishes himself as the head of the community”. [...] The younger males, being thus expelled and wandering about, would, when at last successful in finding a partner, prevent too close interbreeding within the limits of the same family. (qtd. 13: 125)

(Wenn wir daher im Strome der Zeit weit genug zurückblicken und nach den sozialen Gewohnheiten des Menschen, wie er jetzt existiert, schließen, ist die wahrscheinlichste Ansicht die, daß der Mensch ursprünglich in kleinen Gesellschaften lebte, jeder Mann mit einer Frau oder, hatte er die Macht, mit mehreren, welche er eifersüchtig gegen alle anderen Männer verteidigte. Oder er mag kein soziales Tier gewesen sein und doch mit mehreren Frauen für sich allein gelebt haben wie der Gorilla; denn alle Eingeborenen stimmen darin überein, daß nur ein erwachsenes Männchen in einer Gruppe zu sehen ist. Wächst das junge Männchen heran, so findet ein Kampf um die Herrschaft statt, und der Stärkste setzt sich dann, indem er die anderen getötet oder vertrieben hat, als Oberhaupt der Gesellschaft fest [...]. Die jüngeren Männer, welche hiedurch ausgeschieden sind und nun herumwandern, werden auch, wenn sie zuletzt beim Finden einer Gattin erfolgreich sind, die zu einge Inzucht innerhalb der Glieder einer und derselben Familie verhüten. (qtd. 9: 152–53))

With the quotation from Dr. Savage, Darwin stresses the antagonism to which the tyranny of the older male gives rise. A contest for mastery ensues between young and old male (cf. Paul 17–21). Shortly after this reference to the establishment of exogamy at the end of section two, Freud downplays the aspect of natural selection between group members in part four. Against Darwin, he notes human conduct to be less like the behavior of mutually exclusive gorillas than that of interconnected chimps—the brothers must come together in bands. However, for all his emphasized difference from Darwin here, Freud seems to draw on other arguments in The Descent of Man, which make a case for the preferable nature of solidarity over rivalry.
within communal life and in natural selection. Freud partakes of this collective aspiration without speaking of fidelity or “sympathy,” as Darwin does. 40 Victimhood and its attendant ambivalence is a kind of compensation for collective “sympathy,” Darwin’s optimistic expression of an eminently moral constitution.

In this positive form, community is dependent on the ritualistic repetition of the scene of victimhood and victimization, even if it was originally generated through a joint loss and the mourning of that loss. “The totem meal,” Freud elucidates, “which is perhaps mankind’s earliest festival, would thus be a repetition and a commemoration of this memorable and criminal deed, which was the beginning of so many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion” (13: 142) (“Die Totenmalzeit, vielleicht das erste Fest der Menschheit, wäre die Wiederholung und die Gedenkfeier dieser denkwürdigen, verbrecherischen Tat, mit welcher so vieles seinen Anfang nahm, die sozialen Organisationen, die sittlichen Einschränkungen und die Religion” [9: 172]). While Freud may be working deductively from the ritual of Communion, with the ingestion of the body and blood of Christ in the form of wine and bread, as Paul has argued (8–9), he is more abstracly concerned with the imbrications of ritual and victimage. The acts of sacrifice guarantee democratic equality and, more than that, a kind of social belonging. In order to function, however, ritual and sacrificial victimization are dependent on iterability. For this condition to be met—for repetition to be able to occur—a resistant, delineable context is necessary. As such, Freud begins with a closed social group of the primal horde, into which he can somewhat tautologically read the resistant context that is only ever guaranteed through the repetition of its foundational moment.

Freud’s primary insight in Totem for the study at hand is, then, as follows: in an increasingly disenchanted world at the beginning of the twentieth century, the common experience of victimhood becomes a means of generating cohesion through systematic affirmation of the experience. However, it requires a closed community within which the “spectacle” of sacrifice can be found and regenerate bonds as they fray (13: 140). In other words, Freud returns to the origins of mankind to envision an alternative to the radical dissociation of modern society; at this point he espouses sacrifice as a generator of “communism.” He dissolves what we could call ‘vertical’ relations of difference predicated on a stark, incommensurable asymmetry between victim (son) and victimizer (father) into ‘horizontal’ relations of difference, where the religious and cultural foundations are based on a new symmetry between victims (some sons) and victimizers (other sons). It is a fragile, but nonetheless democratizing undertaking. 41 In his ambiguous use of the word “horde”—which anthropologically designates a smallish, loosely knit group, but carries overtones of a “large and unorganized mass of people” (see Strachey’s note in Totem 13: 125, n. 2)—Freud seems to capture
The conflicting thrust of section five of *Totem*, the post–father segment I have been discussing. He wants to reconcile the small, homogeneous, and loosely knit horde with the large, heterogeneous, and utterly disorganized mass. Indeed, in light of the centrifugal threats to cohesion in the multi-ethnic, polyglot Austro-Hungarian Empire at Freud's time of writing, it is unsurprising that Freud is concerned with the issue of community and cohesion, and it is today tempting to suggest a parallel to the current European Union. Furthermore, it is a question of generating a logical coherence in place of the lacking cohesion that threatens the brotherly band and the bands of brotherhood. Freud's trepidation in advancing his hypothesis, his vacillation, self-questioning, and rhetorical feints stylistically mimic the delicate effort involved in generating consistency. His murder story creates narrative coherence through the hair-raising "historical truth" ("historisch zu nennende [...] Wahrheit" [16: 191] [...]—as he himself later calls it in *Moses* (23: 85)—of the primary victimization and the commonality it supposedly generates.

Does Freud in *Totem* already call into question the fantasy of community through victimhood, implicit in the band of brothers? There is some justification for arguing this. First, there is the overlap between his communal ritual and what Freud describes as pathological melancholia. Freud fleshes out his reflections on “Mourning and Melancholia” (“Trauer und Melancholie” [10: 427–46]) in an essay written shortly after *Totem and Taboo* and published 1917 (14: 239–58). There seems to be a closer relation between melancholia and sacrificial rituals than Freud's description of the salutary “mourning” (“Trauer”) in the totem feast would have us believe (13: 140). Melancholia’s fixation on past injustice at the hands of another person, the ambivalence toward this narcissistically chosen love-object, the repeated return to the traumatic experience of injustice, and the manic unleashing of pent-up emotions are all characteristics Freud otherwise locates in “mankind’s earliest festival.” Second, the necessity to return, over and over again, to the primal murder, to re-enact, and re-dramatize the conditions for the current state of equality and fellow feeling insinuates the compulsive nature of social relations dependent on victimhood. Third, he highlights the necessary drama in victimhood and victimization: when Freud approvingly quotes Robertson Smith’s hypothesis of the “commemoration of a mythical tragedy” in ancient Semitic ritual (23: 152), we should be sensitive to the strong and weak meanings of “tragedy.” Precisely the spectacular, dramatized enactment of the scene of victimization in later festivals renders it suspicious: the victim puts on display his powerlessness to render himself all the more powerful. While Freud will problematize the victim’s self-aggrandizement in the more personal *Moses and Monotheism* many years later, he will ultimately recuperate this self-aggrandizement on a higher level as a necessary step for the victim. With a view toward the following chapters, we may say that the increasingly
mediated moment of self-aggrandizement (when achieving victim status is linked to the mass media’s attention) is included, in a highly embryonic form, in Freud’s Totem.

Freud’s definition of “sacrificial” also casts a shadow on his interest in the establishment of community. His explanation is, after all, focalized through the individual, be he neurotic or otherwise. Freud apparently draws his definition of Opfer from the nineteenth-century Grimm-Wörterbuch, with which he will later work in the 1919 essay “The Uncanny” (17: 219–56) (“Das Unheimliche” [12: 227–68]). For in this dictionary, sacrifice is treated in a religious context before it is elucidated in a secular sense. However, Freud uses “self-renunciation,” “Selbstentäußerung,” where Grimm’s Dictionary speaks only of renunciation, defining “Opfer” as something “offered or suffered” and dependent on “priviation or renunciation” (“etwas mit entbehrung oder entsagung dargebrachtes oder erlittenes”) (italics in the original). Here, Freud is offering a definition of “victim” much closer to contemporary German definitions of Opfer, where the stress also falls on the self. Since the Strachey translation leaves out the accent on the self in Freud’s explanation, I again advance my own to highlight Freud’s etymological quest: “From the other sense of ‘self-renunciation’ the profane usage of the word developed” (“Von dem Nebensinn der Selbstentäußerung ging dann die profane Verwendung des Wortes aus” [9: 161]). Freud’s definition must encompass an element of self-abnegation and painful self-renunciation, if the parallels he postulates between phylo- and ontogenetic development are to make sense. The correspondence between mankind’s and the individual’s evolution must go hand in hand to make Freud’s paradigm cohere. With the ideology of bourgeois individualism strong and national, religious, ethnic, and other pressures bearing down on any sense of community, Freud is wary of idealizing the primal horror’s solidarity too much. Instead, he infuses his post-patricidal horror with a more up-to-date vision of social anomie and isolation: where a tenuously communal id was, there only isolated egos can be.

In Moses and Monotheism, Freud returns to Totem and Taboo to mark his distance from the original scene of victimization: there is no longer a resilient, delimitative context for sacrifice in the late 1930s. Freud deterrioralizes and universalizes the experience of sacrificial victimage, even as he attempts to apply his earlier findings to the origin of Judaism and its dialectical relationship to Christianity. I noted that the totemic ritual provides Freud with a clear framework for developing his ideas about social cohesion and societal development. When, under the pressures of National Socialism and its own homoerotic “male confederacies” or “Männerbünde” (23: 84 and 190), he turns back to the primal patricide to interrogate the questions of Jewish identity, anti-Semitism, and Judaism’s resilience to hardship, he has good reason to further underline a victim’s ultimate triumph over any adversary. For my purposes, it is worth looking at the
role of ritual, so fundamental to *Opfer*’s value within a social body. In Freud’s construction of the Judaic religion, the Egyptian priest Moses—
influenced by pharaoh Amenhotep’s sun-worship—brings monotheism to the oppressed Semitic tribe living under Egyptian domination. Leading them out of Egypt in what becomes the historical core of the Exodus narrative, Moses imparts to the Hebrews the severe demands of the new god, for which he is murdered. Now, in Freud’s 1937 historical account in the second essay,

[... ] the main function of the priests [was] to develop and supervise the ritual, and besides this to preserve the holy writ and revise it in accordance with their aims. But was not all sacrifice and all ceremonial at bottom only magic and sorcery, such as had been unconditionally rejected by the old Mosaic teaching? Thereupon there arose [... ] the Prophets, who tirelessly preached the old Mosaic doctrine—that the deity disdained sacrifice and ceremonial and asked only for faith and a life in truth and justice [...]. (23: 51)


We see that the progress that Judaism represents for Freud relates to the prohibition placed on outward sacrifice (self-sacrifice and self-renunciation are, of course, still present). Freud no longer deems sacrificial ceremonies such as the totem feast worthy of preservation. Progress, in terms of communal feeling and banding together, is not reliant on any endogenous investment in sacrificial rites. Indeed, Freud stresses that the “social contract” (“Gesellschaftsvertrag”) is still intact in this new variant, with its “renunciation of instinct” (“Triebverzicht”), “recognition of mutual obligations” (“Anerkennung von gegenseitigen Verpflichtungen”), and “introduction of definite institutions” (23: 82) (“Einsatzung bestimmter [... ] Institutionen” [16: 188, emphasis in original]). How may this shift away from sacrificial rites inflect our understanding of the term *Opfer*?

For Freud, the denigration of ceremony marks the particular distinction of Judaism and places it into a direct and conflicting relationship with the universalizing tendencies of a ritualistic (Catholic) Christianity. With respect to Judaism, we have the decreased efficacy of *Opfer*: the asymmetry between victim/God and victimizer/son remains irreducible, and a victim cannot serve as a substitute. In relation to Christianity, we have the complete substitutability of victim/God for victim/son. As Paul has argued, Jesus embodies “an adequate talionic sacrifice sufficient to erase the guilt for having killed God, the guilt that sustains the Law.” Such an equivalent
victim can expunge the murder, Paul continues, “and wipe clean the guilt of the Israelites—and by extension all humanity—in a way that, as the Epistle [Rom. 7:7] to the Hebrews stresses, the blood of goats and lambs cannot” (211–12). The issue, as Freud envisions it, rests on the comparability and substitutability of one victim with another. In my view, Freud is problematizing some of his early assumptions about communality based on victimhood, and with Moses he marks his return to a particular moment in the Opfer dialectic that represented his primum movens in socio-cultural development. While democracy relies on the “deferred obedience” of the sons to the slain victim-father in Totem, when the sons institute equalizing laws associated with paternal injunctions through rituals after the murder, it no longer guarantees the long-term equality of all in Moses. The sons' “deferred obedience” of Freud's post-murder scenario in Totem and Taboo winds up being an endless deferral of obedience in his account in the 1930s. With this deferral, a sense of guilt arises (this, to be sure, was already the case in Totem, but is emphasized in Moses). Only when one victim can be completely substituted for the first, paternal victim, does the sacrificial system work—as it does in Christianity; only then can guilt for the deferral be assuaged. As Eric Santner has argued, engaging with Daniel Boyarin (251–53), Freud depicts Judaism as a Neo-Kantian religion of reason, which is “averse to all forms of ritual, to all ‘carnal’ practices aside from the elaboration and refinement of the original ethical commandments”. Christianity’s popularity and its universalizing thrust are linked to its ability to continue the symbolic rites Judaism has shunned. The only important sacrificial substitution is paradoxically of an asymmetrical order—of the son for the father—that has been forced into symmetry—one part of the father (Jesus) takes the place of another part of the father (God). This sacrifice and substitution is eternally repeated in the ceremony of mass. All other symbolic rituals in Christianity, for Freud, belong to the category of symmetrical victim-victimizer relations of a lower order (he notes the subordinate role of other deities that are absorbed into Christianity [88]).

Not everywhere in Moses does Freud turn away from his earlier postulates. In upholding his ideas from Totem and Taboo on the law of the talion, which “lays it down that a murder can only be expiated by the sacrifice of another life” (13: 154) (“kann ein Mord nur durch die Opferung eines anderen Lebens gesühnt werden” [9: 185]), Freud posits a distinct logical end to his victim dynamic that is completed in Moses: competitive victimhood (which necessarily results from competing claims to victim status as well as from the inability for one victim to compensate fully for another) insists on resolution, at the very moment that it cannot be resolved. Returning almost verbatim to the formulation for talionic law that he used in his phantastic and phantasmatic reconstruction, Freud in his historical reconstruction emphasizes that rivaling claims to victimhood will ultimately
demand to be judged against each other.62 The primacy or priority of one over the other will be the dominating issue for society’s members. Competitive victimhood is, in other words, the invariable result of the displacement from a vertical axis—where the sons’ claims to victim status can only ever be measured against a transcendental signified (the primal father, God, the paternal injunction) that makes any immanent adjudication impossible—to a horizontal axis, where the sons’ claims will and can only be measured against other sons’ contentions. In this manner, we are also able to understand Yerushalmi’s observation in *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable* that both Judaism and Christianity are actually both “son-religions,” “each inevitably claiming its exclusive legitimacy at the expense of the other” (92), with no clear outcome to their opposing truth claims. In the case of radical asymmetry between victim and victimizer, the question of victimhood may be raised, but it can only be truly resolved in a transcendental realm. In the case of greater symmetry, the same question is brought into immanence, but resists resolution.63

Freud associates the impossibility of resolving competing victim claims with the diffusion of a vague but ubiquitous perception of victimhood in modern society. When he writes about this “malaise” (“Unbehagen”) toward the end of his *Moses*, he brings to the forefront contemporary implications for the modern masses. Because victimhood lacks a clearly discernible cause and no one remembers the true beginning of victimization, the dispersion of victim status brings with it unease and apocalypticism. As such, the general emotional state is akin to the discontents of Baudrillard’s “victim society” and the dissatisfying, reverberative testimonials of Minnow’s “victim talk.” Freud hypothesizes that personal, Oedipal guilt spreads like an infection, contagious to all: “The sense of guilt of those days was very far from being any longer restricted to the Jewish people; it had caught hold of all the Mediterranean peoples as a dull *malaise*, a premonition of calamity for which no one could suggest a reason” (23: 135) (“Das Schuldbewusstsein jener Zeit war längst nicht mehr auf das jüdische Volk beschränkt, es hatte als ein dumpfes Unbehagen, als eine Unheilswahn, deren Grund niemand anzugeben wüsste, alle Mittelmeervölker ergriffen” [16: 244]). Judaism itself becomes, to some extent, a contingent occurrence in Freud’s account (the Israelis happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time and are thus chosen), as does anti-Semitism. Having witnessed the mass phenomena fueling National Socialism’s fire and the ire unleashed against completely acculturated and assimilated Jews, Freud links prejudice in mass society of the 1930s to perceptions of small, contingent differences, when the larger dynamics involved are resistant to discernment. In the final pages of the third essay he stresses mass behavior in precisely this regard: “[T]he intolerance of the masses, strangely enough, expresses itself more strongly against small differences than against fundamental ones” (“[D]ie Intoleranz der Massen äußert sich merkwürdigerweise gegen kleine

http://site.ebrary.com/id/10171532?ppg=28
Copyright © Palgrave Macmillan. . All rights reserved.
May not be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher, except fair uses permitted under U.S. or applicable copyright law.
Unterschiede stärker als gegen fundamentale Differenzen” [16: 197]).

People in mass society focus on minimal differences that either obfuscate or simulate the fundamental difference between a primal father, who “does not engage in any form of exchange and so cannot be said to inhabit a world of object relations,” and the sons, who do both—engage in all manner of exchange and live in this world with its subject–object distinctions (Santner 31, emphasis in original). In sum, Freud’s account must be kept in mind when we turn to the horizontal paradigms we encounter in the first half of this book, where the indifference of differences comes to be felt as the primary problem facing Western European social democracies today. In the second half, minimal or non-existent differences or the simulation of fundamental differences will seek to restore a jenseits, a beyond, to victim society.

IV

In Freud’s writing, as in some of the works under discussion here, much hinges on the substitutability of victims—and its relationship to a discursive logic of objectification. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer seize on these aspects in their continuation of Freud’s sacrificial thinking in Dialectic of Enlightenment (Dialektik der Aufklärung) (published 1947). Adorno and Horkheimer’s argument about sacrifice alerts us to aspects that will recur in this book: the issue of substitutable victims, the malaise of a capitalist world reliant on the equation of victims, and the introversion and dissemination of sacrifice.

The introduction and first excursus on the Homeric Odyssey, interweaving totems, magic, animism, sacrifice, and hordes (1–62), is a direct engagement with Totem and Taboo and an indirect one with Moses and Monotheism. Indeed, Adorno and Horkheimer’s overarching argument concerning the baneful entwinement of myth and enlightenment, of instrumental reason and the omnipotence of thought, begins with an explicit invocation and implicit condemnation of Freud’s “law of the talion.” According to the Dialectic of Enlightenment, we have de-mythologized all realms of life during the course of our history. In the process, we have attempted to draw everything external to ourselves into the domain of consciousness, in order to subjugate and control it. We have enshrined the talionic—and, by extension, capitalist—equivalence in sacrificial thinking as the non plus ultra. “All birth is paid for with death, all fortune with misfortune,” they write, continuing shortly thereafter: “Hence, for both mythical and enlightened justice, guilt and atonement, happiness and misfortune, are seen as the two sides of an equation” (11–12) (“Alle Geburt wird mit dem Tod bezahlt, jedes Glück mit Unglück. […] Daher gelten denn der mythischen wie der aufgeklärten Gerechtigkeit Schuld und Buße, Glück und Unglück als Seiten einer Gleichung” [38–39]). As a result, we
deal with a functional society of sons, who are universally fungible under the laws of the marketplace (7).

Let me draw on the arguments from the beginning of Dialectic of Enlightenment to briefly adumbrate the concern with fungible humanity. In order to espouse Odysseus rather than Freud’s Oedipus as an avatar of Enlightenment thought, Adorno and Horkheimer devote a large section of their first excursion to the role of ritualistic sacrifice (40–45; Wiggershaus 50–52). They return to the various sacrifices demanded of and performed by the epic hero to argue against then current vitalist and irrationalist interpretations of sacrifice as regenerative for the social body; they also wish to counter psychoanalytic readings that ascribe a democratic impulse to the primal horde (260 n. 6, 9, 16). For them, incipient secularization marks the sacrificial act and serves an individuating function (Schmid-Noerr, “Sechzig”). In the Odyssey, sacrifice straddles an uneasy position between capitalist trade and pre-capitalist gift. Sacrifice in capitalism, to use the terms I introduced in section III, epitomizes the dynamics of a post-primal murder world, where like object is set against like; the gift, by contrast, characterizes a pre-murder world beyond or outside of object relations. Self-sacrifice in capitalism, by extension, requires the movement into this realm. Occasionally Adorno and Horkheimer seek to recuperate elements of their pre-murder, pre-object relations world in the post-murder humanity they describe—distinguished as it is by nearly unmitting bleakness.

The emergent ego, as which Odysseus is coded in their account, is continually in opposition with the instinctual environment from which it arises as a result of the “law of the talion” (Deneen 190). Joel Whitebook admirably summarizes this thread of Adorno and Horkheimer’s thought:

Odysseus sought to emancipate himself from the prerational and preindividualized world of myth and thereby escape the law of equivalence. His trials and adventures chronicle the stages in the emergence of the individuated, unified, and purposeful, which is to say, enlightened subject. [...] He reckoned that by bringing the disorderliness of his internal nature under the control of a unified ego—that is, by repressing his unconscious-instinctual life—he could outwit the law of equivalence and survive the numerous dangers that awaited him on his journey home. (77)

Of course, Adorno and Horkheimer go on to show that any such escape from talionic law is illusory. The self-sufficient ego can only come into existence if it relinquiishes its own investment in the here and now, endlessly deferring psychosexual fulfillment: “this antireason appears prototypically in the hero who escapes the sacrifice by sacrificing himself” (43) (“diese Wiedervernunft ist prototypisch im Heros ausgebildet, der dem Opfer sich entzieht, indem er sich opfert” [79]). As such, self-sacrifice in Adorno and Horkheimer’s account parallels Freud’s stress on self-renunciation in...
Totem. The German philosophers also do not lose sight of the collective in which this incipient individual with his sacrificial thinking is embedded. They stress the doubled character of sacrifice, “the magic self-abandonment of the individual to the collective (in whatever form) and the self-preservation achieved through the technology of this magic” (“die magische Selbstpreisgabe des Einzelnen ans Kollektiv—wie immer es damit bestellt sei—und die Selberhaltung durch die Technik solcher Magic”). While this twofold, chias-like quality for them implies a contradiction and spurs the “further development of the rational element in sacrifice” (260 n. 6) (“auf die Entfaltung gerade des rationalen Elements im Opfer drängt” [73 n. 61]), it may also help us explain the necessity of ritual and its eventual downplaying in Freud’s Moses. Since sacrifice is the motor driving individual and social development, Adorno and Horkheimer seem to argue, ritual cannot disappear with the dematerialization of patriarchal power. Rather, it becomes the rationalizing element within Opfer. Sacrificial ritual has been reformulated through its incorporation, reintegrated into every possible context as mathematic calculation, and undergone a complete dispersion. Sacrificial logic, which necessitates that a ‘price be paid,’ continues in all-pervasive modern science: “Mathematical procedure became a kind of ritual of thought” (19) (“Die mathematische Verfahrensweise wurde gleichsam zum Ritual des Gedankens” [48]). With the introjection of sacrifice in the self-sacrificial ego (42–43), such ritualistic thinking determines all forms of Western life.58 Both culture and civilization in the traditional German opposition fall prey to its seductive clarity. The institution of Opfer is nothing less than the “stigma of historical catastrophe” (41).69

The German philosophers introduce deception (“Betrug”) in lieu of Freudian guilt as a foundational element in the new social order. Where Freud establishes a communal sense through the idea that shared guilt binds everyone who takes part in the primal murder and later totem feasts,70 Adorno and Horkheimer are keen to show that any sense of communality is eviscerated in a society that uses deceptive sacrifices.71 For them, deception cannot serve the same inside-outside function as guilt, where the guilty person is unable to imagine himself outside the closed circle of victimizers-cum-victims and thus cannot assign responsibility to a wrongdoer.72 Sacrifice is not important to position the group or as a generator of values (including the love accompanying guilt). Not only do sacrifices deceive the god to whom they are offered in bad faith, but they are structurally homologous to the ruses perpetrated against the people by the priestly class—which is engaged in the work of distortion through ceremonial rites, much like Freud’s priests (Moses 23: 50, 64). It is worth quoting Adorno and Horkheimer to clarify this point: “All sacrificial acts, deliberately planned by humans, deceive the god for whom they are performed: by imposing on him the primacy of human purposes they dissolve away his power, and the fraud against him passes over seamlessly
INTRODUCTION

into that perpetrated by unbelieving priests against believing congregations” (40) (“Alle menschlichen Opferhandlungen, planmäßig betrieben, betrügen den Gott, dem sie gelten: sie unterstellen ihn dem Primat der menschlichen Zwecke, lösen seine Macht auf, und der Betrug an ihm geht bruchlos über in den, welchen die ungläubigen Priester an der gläubigen Gemeinde vollführen” [74]). Sacrifice gestures toward the imminent split between the victimizers and the victims—since the disbeliefing priests require sacrifice to keep the believing community (which also acts in bad faith) in place—at the very moment that it denies any break (“bruchlos”) in its power to create commonality and community (“Gemeinde”). A victim must be split from society in order to be sacrificed at the same time as this fraudulent act is presented as a necessity. This break without a break will be repeated, on a microcosmic level, in every individual that must engage in the renunciation of his natural self to get ahead in bourgeois life. 73 The mathematical thinking in equivalents—a son for a son, the self for the self—is indicated in Adorno and Horkheimer’s word choice here. There is no remainder in this division (in German: “Bruchrechnung”), where the calculating priests ensure that a son will be sacrificed for a son, an object for an object. 74 One is tempted to continue the word play: the distorted narratives, which the priests tell to rationalize their victimizations, feign continuity rather than admit breaks or “Britchte.” 75

Adorno and Horkheimer themselves sensitize the reader to the necessity of breaks in the ceremonial rituals that accompany sacrifice and self-sacrifice, as well as in the sacrificial logic that sees all victims as equivalents. The contours of a break can be redrawn with a glance at prehistory, and Adorno and Horkheimer go back to a moment in time when sacrifice might still have avoided the discursive logic of objectification. The writers, in effect, restate a kind of primal difference, an incommensurable asymmetry between the victim and the thing it is to represent in sacrifice. In their introduction, they impugn the substitutability I have been discussing. “The substitution which takes place in sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic,” they warn (“Die Substitution beim Opfer bezeichnet einen Schritt zur diskursiven Logik hin”). The “arbitrariness of the specimen” (“die Beliebigkeit des Exemplars”) is already inherent in the exchange of the paschal lamb for the firstborn in the Bible, and of the deer for the daughter Iphigenia in Greek myth. While these victimaes have their own inherent qualities, they stand in for the species within the sacrificial act. Adorno and Horkheimer underline the contingency of this equivalence, which brings together individual and species, onto- and phylogenesis (as Freud does in Totem and Moses). Sacrifice and sacrificial ritual require negating the “abundance of qualities” (“Fülle der Qualitäten”) in the victim who is sacrificed, qualities that exceed any exchangeable ‘core.’ To put this another way: what has been lost in rationalizing sacrifice is the perception of an irreducible difference that depends on the fullness and abundance of qualities. Not enough
difference is discerned between the victim and the victimizer, between the victim and the thing it represents, between the self and the sacrifice of itself. Where once a sacrifice still meant communication with a god and hence the “sanctity of the hie et nunc” (“Heiligkeit des hie et nunc”), this gives way to a scientific thinking where difference has become “fluid” (“flüssig” [32]), fungible, and profoundly inmanent (6–7).

In Adorno and Horkheimer’s view, it becomes impossible to resurrect such prehistorical sacrificial thinking in the present. A break marks man’s irreversible separation from nature and a way of life anterior to victimization. When Adorno and Horkheimer, with uncharacteristic trepidation, return to their moment of historical truth within sacrifice (41), they hark back not only to the inmanent reasons which may have made sacrifice necessary (where they come down on the side of Freud’s hungry savages), but to the transcendent ones, which requires a different kind of thinking in equivalence—equivalence with a difference. To restate an asymmetry between victimized and victimizing consciousness would mean partaking of both the pre- and post-murder worlds, of the sons and their exchanges as well as of the father, who resists any exchange.

I have come back to the break within the already broken temporality of modernity with which I began. My detour through these ‘master’ texts from the first half of the twentieth century may seem presumptuous vis-à-vis the far less threatening victim rhetoric we encounter today and comparing the eschatological tenor of Freud’s, Adorno and Horkheimer’s victim models, their “historical catastrophe” and “premonition of calamity” with the “dull malaise” in the victim narratives under discussion here might be perceived as unfitting. After all, these thinkers were writing against the backdrop of National Socialism. As Jews within Germanic culture, they had a vested interest in exposing the dangers of self-sacrificial rhetoric on the part of a majority that saw itself as falsely victimized. However, the immense academic currency of these texts today suggests our identification with the mechanisms of sacrificial victimage they describe, be it in the repression or renunciation of one’s own desires and aggressions or in the sense of victimization at the hands of external, often disembodied entities. The scholar Andreas Huyssen has remarked on the extreme popularity of Dialectic of Enlightenment and Freudian trauma theory, tying it to the fact that we have come to see “modernity as the trauma that victimizes the world, that we cannot leave behind, that causes all our symptoms” (9). Indeed, the recent attention to the work of Giorgio Agamben is part and parcel of an interest in the aspects of self-sacrificial victimage of an ongoing modernity. Throughout the various parts of the work comprising Homo sacer, Agamben does not tire of linking homo sacer to the very modernity that will be under attack in the other works I discuss (most directly in René Girard’s Violence and the Sacred and Peter Sloterdijk’s The Contemp...
In modernity, the principle of the sacredness of life is thus completely emancipated from sacrificial ideology, and in our culture the meaning of the term “sacred” continues the semantic history of homo sacer and not that of sacrifice (and this is why the demystifications of sacrificial ideology so common today remain insufficient, even though they are correct). What confronts us today is a life that as such is exposed to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal ways. [...] Sacredness is a line of flight still present in contemporary politics, a line that is as such moving into zones increasingly vast and dark, to the point of ultimately coinciding with the biological life itself of citizens. If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually homines sacri. (114–15)

(Nella modernità, il principio della sacertà della vita si è, cioè, completamente emancipato dall’ideologia sacrificale e il significato del termine sacro nella nostra cultura continua la storia semantica dell’homo sacer e non quella del sacrificio (di cui l’insufficienza delle pur giuste demistificazioni, oggi proposte da più parti, dell’ideologia sacrificale). [...] La sacertà è una linea di fuga tuttora presente nella politica contemporanea, che, come tale, si sposta verso zone sempre più vaste e oscure, fino a coincidere con la stessa vita biologica dei cittadini. Se oggi non vi è più una figura predeterminabile dell’homo sacro, è, forse, perché siamo tutti virtualmente homines sacri. [126–27])

It is worth noting that this argument’s “line of flight” is a properly modern one. Agamben returns not only to Foucault’s notion of biopower in Homo sacer, but also to Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Georges Bataille, Martin Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt. In my reflections, I certainly do not mean to propose that there would and could not have been alternative routes into the topic of victim society. One could very well imagine beginning with Nietzsche’s conceptualization of slave morality and resentment and continuing on to Foucauldian genealogies and discourses of power. Alternatively, one could relate Franz Kafka’s Josef K. from The Trial (Der Prozeß, 1925)—the paradoxically guilty innocent victim—to the depersonalized, all-pervasive state authority described in Walter Benjamin’s “Critique of Violence” (1: 236–52) (“Zur Kritik der Gewalt” [2.1: 179–203]). Indeed, other, now classic modern texts treat the issue of victimhood, sacrifice, and social attenuation in such a way as to suggest a kind of continuity or, to speak less linearly, similarity with discourses of the late twentieth century. However, the contingency of my choices here does not give lie to the pervasiveness of the rhetoric I describe in the time period from 1970 to 2005. If anything, the plethora of applicable texts only serves to show the generality of the phenomenon I perceive as intrinsic to our
modernity—which many of the people under discussion here help constitute even when they criticize it.

In the novels, films, paintings, philosophical essays, and poems that follow—where this victim rhetoric comes to a head at the same time as it undergoes refinement—we will notice a symptomatic admixture of cunning and self-deception, a combination of sacrificial and self-sacrificial rhetoric, and a movement between weakness in power and power in weakness. At times, it will seem to be an inexorable dialectic, containing an element of self-renunciation at the same time as it holds out a deceptive promise of redemption. However, I would also like to remain open to the possibility of the breaks to which Adorno and Horkheimer alert us. These could, after all, become the condition for the possibility of living in and as a “victim society,” rendering Baudrillard’s lament overhasty.