

## Navigating Implication: An Interview with Michael Rothberg

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**Michael Rothberg** is Professor of English and Comparative Literature and the 1939 Society Samuel Goetz Chair in Holocaust Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. His work on multidirectional memory and traumatic realism has influenced scholars working in the fields of memory studies, genocide and Holocaust studies, postcolonial studies, and beyond. More recently, with *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (2019), Rothberg sets out to expand the way we think and talk about political violence and injustice by offering a new critical term: the implicated subject. This interview was conducted via email between February and early April 2020.

**Before we talk about your new book, I'd like to start by asking about your previous book, *Multidirectional Memory*, which already provided a framework for addressing the complex and multifaceted ways in which people are involved in disparate processes of persecution and political violence. I'm thinking here particularly of your discussion of Maurice Papon, who was involved in the deportation of French Jews during the Holocaust and later in the torture of prisoners in the Algerian War. In this case, paying attention to the perpetrators offers a way to see the multidirectional connections between these seemingly disparate crimes that would otherwise have been obscured. Can you say more about multidirectionality and its relation to questions of perpetration, complicity, guilt, and responsibility?**

In *Multidirectional Memory*, I set out how to contest – and offer an alternative to – what I saw as the dominant way of talking about memory conflict in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries: an understanding of memory as a competition of victims. This ‘competitive memory,’ as I called it, was premised on the logic of the zero-sum game. That is, both scholars and citizens seemed to assume that collective memories crowded each other out of the public sphere: too much Holocaust memory meant not enough memory of slavery; too much memory of slavery might mean not enough memory of colonialism – and vice versa. I didn't think that was how public, collective

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memory worked and I proposed instead a theory of multidirectional memory, which argues that collective memory works productively and dialogically. In other words, far from crowding out other historical memories, the rise of Holocaust memory actually brought greater attention to the traumatic legacies of slavery and colonialism. I also made the somewhat less obvious point that Holocaust memory itself was the result of its interaction with those other traumatic legacies. I demonstrated these points in a variety of national contexts, but the context of France during the Algerian War of Independence proved particularly rich for exploring these multidirectional dynamics. The lesson I took from this comparative interrogation of Holocaust memory was that group memories develop through the echoing and appropriation of the forms and contents of other groups' memories. In other words, groups do not 'own' memories: memories are not private property but overlapping and frequently shared resources for the ongoing articulation of identity and claims to justice.

As that brief description suggests, *Multidirectional Memory* focused more on victims than perpetrators. For the most part, my concern there was with the forms of shared memory and solidarity that emerged in the wake of different histories of *victimization*. So, for example, people like W.E.B. Du Bois, Charlotte Delbo, or Caryl Phillips were primarily exploring the experience of victims of genocide, of racism, or of colonial violence, and making connections on the basis of that experience.

That said, you're right that the figure of Maurice Papon does play a significant role in making some of the cross-historical connections in *Multidirectional Memory*. At a historical level this makes a lot of sense: Papon is a brilliant example of how forms of perpetration can propagate themselves across seemingly discrete histories. Thus, Papon was responsible both for forms of colonial violence (in Algeria and in Paris) and for the deportation of Jews during the Nazi occupation. Clearly there are many other similar examples of 'multidirectional' exchange between regimes of violence.

At the level of memory, however, things are a bit more complicated when it comes to Papon. Interestingly, even though we know in retrospect that Papon was involved in both Nazi and colonial violence, that understanding was quite belated. At the time of the October 17, 1961 massacre of peacefully demonstrating Algerians in Paris, when Papon was chief of the Paris police, he was not known as a Nazi collaborator. And yet, despite not being able to make that biographical link, people at the time of the massacre immediately connected the murder and roundup of Algerians to what French Jews had experienced under

the Nazis. Later, when the full truth came out, the multidirectional connections became even stronger – and you can see that in late twentieth- and early twenty-first century cultural production (such as Michael Haneke’s film *Caché* or novels by Leïla Sebbar and Didier Daeninckx – all of which I discuss in the book).

The Papon story and the overlapping forms of colonial and fascist violence we now associate with him suggest a couple of things that were not at the forefront of my thinking when I wrote *Multidirectional Memory*, but that could be suggestive for scholars in perpetrator studies. First, that perpetrators and histories of perpetration can just as well serve as multidirectional ‘knots’ of memory as victims and histories of victimization. And second, that it is ultimately impossible to separate histories of victimization from histories of perpetration; perhaps the interplay between these different perspectives constitutes another source of multidirectionality.

**Perhaps this is a good transition to your new book, *The Implicated Subject*, since a knot is a powerful metaphor for implication. Could you maybe start by telling us what you mean by ‘the implicated subject’ and describing how it is relevant to scholars in perpetrator studies?**

My concept of the implicated subject is meant to fill a gap in thinking about violence and inequality, on the one hand, and historical and political responsibility, on the other. My premise is that we have not had an adequate vocabulary for describing the indirect, structural, and collective forms of agency that enable and propagate violence and exploitation but that can’t be described as forms of perpetration. Implicated subjects are those subjects who play crucial, but indirect roles in systems of domination and histories of harm. They are also subjects who inherit and benefit from such systems and histories: they are aligned with power and privilege, without occupying their control centers. Etymologically speaking, to be implicated is to be ‘folded into’ structures and histories. In other words, implicated subjects do not originate or direct regimes of power, but they inhabit them and participate in upholding them.

I hope scholars in perpetrator studies will immediately see the relevance of the concept: it is not meant to replace the category of the perpetrator but rather to supplement it. Even in dramatic cases where perpetrators of political violence are readily identifiable, I would posit that the conditions of possibility for perpetration include a much larger number of implicated subjects without whom perpetration would be

impossible – or, at least, would have a much more limited scope. Think of the thousands of bureaucrats – employees of the railroad, for instance – who enabled the Nazi genocide but couldn't easily be categorized as perpetrators. In other, less 'spectacular' cases of structural violence – say, the kinds associated with global capitalist exploitation – there may be no easily identifiable perpetrators at all; instead, violence is enabled by networks of implicated subjects, most of whom are very far from the damage to which they contribute. In both cases, my proposal is that we consider perpetration beyond its most obvious and visible instantiations and attend to its enabling conditions and to its aftermaths, which propagate violence and inequality across generations.

Widening our lens to take implicated subjects into account also means recalibrating our understanding of responsibility for violence. While legal remedies remain important, the much wider – and less overtly 'criminal' – realm of implication suggests the need for a broader collective and therefore political understanding of responsibility. I explore this form of responsibility throughout my book and suggest that recognizing implicated responsibility can lead to new forms of 'long-distance' solidarity.

**There are those who argue that the concept of the perpetrator as an identity or subject position should be abandoned altogether in favor of an emphasis on perpetration as an action. Yet, you place a strong emphasis on the subject. Why is it important to you to hold on to the category of the subject?**

I think the shift to an emphasis on perpetration – as opposed to perpetrators – is an important one for understanding the dynamics of violence. In other words, I agree with scholars such as my colleague Aliza Luft that it is important to clarify the conditions under which people move in and out of participation in acts of extreme violence. Such a clarification is crucial to understanding how such violence becomes possible – and how we might prevent it or stop it. By emphasizing the complex positions people often find themselves in in relation to histories of violence, I try to contribute to that project.

At the same time, as you say, I also want to hold on to the category of the subject. There are a couple of things to say about this. First, while decentering the category of the perpetrator and replacing it with the category of perpetration can help us understand the onset and cessation of violence, I wonder if we don't still need the category of the perpetrator for the pursuit of justice and accountability in the aftermath of violence.

Even as we recognize that people move in and out of different forms of participation and non-participation, taking part in perpetration still makes one a perpetrator *from a moral and legal perspective*, it seems to me. An understanding of the uneven dynamics of perpetration might mitigate our moral and legal judgment in some cases – for instance, if someone acts as a rescuer while also participating in violence or makes a definitive shift from perpetration to the defense of victims. But in most cases I believe we still need the category of perpetrator to contemplate what, in *Die Schuldfrage (The Question of German Guilt)*, Karl Jaspers called ‘criminal guilt.’

But a second point is even more directly germane to my project in *The Implicated Subject*. What I mean by the category of the subject – and indeed by the notion of the implicated subject – is not something ontological, identitarian, or individualistic. No one is essentially an implicated subject, no one is forever and in all situations an implicated subject. To be implicated is to occupy a subject *position*, which is to say a location in shifting historical and structural contexts. But I also go farther in suggesting that the *category* of the subject plays a fundamental role in domination, violence, and inequality. Here I am inspired by the wonderful book *New Demons* by the philosopher Simona Forti, from which I take the idea of the subject as a ‘transmission belt’ of domination. But I think you find similar arguments – upon which Forti is drawing – in philosophical and theoretical work by the likes of Nietzsche, Althusser, and Foucault. In Althusser, for instance, the subject is precisely the ideological category par excellence – and for that reason plays a significant role in the reproduction of the relations of exploitation and domination. Similarly, implicated subjects are transmission belts of domination in so far as they enable and facilitate power and violence in indirect ways that cannot be confused with direct forms of perpetration. In the book I draw on work on ignorance, unknowing, aphasia, and denial by scholars in queer, black, and postcolonial studies; this work helps us think through the ways that forms of subjectivity are implicated in domination, but I think there’s more work to be done along these lines.

Ultimately, then, I don’t see my emphasis on the implicated subject as incompatible with the tendency in the field you describe, even as I do emphasize the importance of the subject as a *category* and think we should reflect more on the stakes for justice of abandoning entirely the category of perpetrator.

**One of the main ambitions of perpetrator studies as we see it is to problematize the concept and category of the perpetrator and to think through different modalities of complicity, guilt, and responsibility. Your concept of the implicated subject is clearly an important contribution to this discourse. Could you tell us what you mean by the implicated subject and how this term relates to other neighboring concepts such as the bystander, the accomplice, or the beneficiary?**

While the subtitle of my book is ‘beyond victims and perpetrators,’ in some ways the book is really calling for a move beyond the category of the bystander. Of the famous triad of categories – victims, perpetrators, bystanders – the final category has received the least consideration. My argument is that when we do turn to it, it proves to be a weak category. While there may truly be people who merely ‘stand by’ passively as spectators to scenarios of violence, in most cases those who are often called bystanders are in my vocabulary implicated subjects. This means that they are not merely uninvolved and innocent spectators, but bear a certain responsibility for histories and structures they occupy and the events to which they are proximate.

In offering the category of the implicated subject, I am drawing on – and in dialogue with – important work that has been happening over the last couple of decades on a number of other non-perpetrator subject positions, such as the beneficiary, the accomplice, the descendant, etc.

Several innovative books on complicity have appeared in recent years by scholars such as Mark Sanders, Christopher Kutz, Naomi Mandel, and Debarati Sanyal. I am inspired by much of this work and see it as proximate to what I am doing. I also can see that accusations of complicity provide a stronger sense of indictment than a new term like ‘implication,’ and that such indictment can be strategically valuable as a catalyst for political mobilization. But, with this in mind, I see two ways implication is distinct from complicity. First, complicity remains too close to the question of criminal guilt, in Jaspers’s terms. To be complicit in a crime is to be, precisely, indictable. But implicated subjects are not criminally guilty; they are not indictable by a court, but are rather politically and morally responsible for addressing their implication. As Iris Marion Young puts it in her critique of efforts to apply the concept of complicity to structural injustices in her last book *Responsibility for Justice*, complicity remains within a linear notion of causality that does not capture the specificity of structural domination—or, in my terms, implication in such structures. This focus on structures focuses attention

on a synchronic distinction between complicity and implication, but there is also a second, diachronic dimension. In short, I don't see how one can be 'complicit' in past crimes, but I do think we are often implicated in them. So, as a citizen of the United States, I am implicated in the settler colonial project that led to the founding of the nation as I am in the long history of slavery, but I don't think it would make sense to say that I am 'complicit' in those histories. I would say the same thing, for example, about Germans born after the Holocaust. I don't think these postwar generations are complicit in National Socialism, but they are implicated, and that entails certain responsibilities.

There has also been a great deal of work on the figure of the beneficiary in recent years. Some of that comes out of histories of transitional justice, such as that in South Africa. Important work along these lines has been done by Mahmood Mamdani and Robert Meister. Recently, Bruce Robbins has also theorized the beneficiary as a key subject position for thinking about global inequality. My argument is that the beneficiary is always an implicated subject, but that not all questions of implication can be reduced to beneficiary status. The importance of the category of the beneficiary is that it works, like the implicated subject, both on diachronic and synchronic axes. These axes are, of course, intertwined, but also analytically separable.

Thinking about the beneficiary in contexts of transitional justice or in debates about reparations for slavery turns on what I would call diachronic implication: the historical legacies of systems of domination and extraction. Mamdani makes a nice distinction in thinking about the different situations of aftermath in Rwanda and South Africa. In Rwanda, he writes, you need to think about a post-genocidal society in which there are many former perpetrators but few beneficiaries; in South African, in contrast, you have relatively few perpetrators but many beneficiaries. I find this useful as a model of categorical precision.

Global inequality in the present certainly emerges from historical forces (as the South African case illustrates), but, as Robbins argues in *The Beneficiary*, it also has a strong presentist dimension that needs to be addressed. I appreciate Robbins's polemical approach, but I also see limits in his attempt to simplify beneficiary status to a strictly present-day relation defined purely in economic terms and through a stark North/South dichotomy. (I've written about this in a review essay for the journal *Contemporary Literature*.) As with the category of the implicated subject, the category of the beneficiary is analytically powerful

because it allows us to bring together diachronic and synchronic entanglements, but it doesn't cover all the terrain that interests me.

While implicated subjects are often beneficiaries, there are forms of implication that do not fit neatly into that category – hence, my belief that we need a more encompassing term. Again, my examples are both synchronic and diachronic. On the synchronic side, I am concerned not just with inequality but also with forms of long-distance nationalism; that is, with the implication of diasporic groups in nationalist projects that they participate in from a distance. My particular concern is with diasporic Jewish support for Israel's dispossession of the Palestinians, but I can think of other long-distance nationalist projects such as support from Indian and Turkish diasporas for Hindutva or genocide denialism, respectively. I wouldn't say the category of the beneficiary is completely inappropriate here (for example, Jews in the diaspora do 'benefit' from citizenship privileges in Israel that Palestinians born in their homeland do not), but it doesn't capture the essence of the problem, it seems to me. Similarly, on the diachronic side – and to return to that 'classic' example – I would not say that contemporary Germans are 'beneficiaries' of the Holocaust, even if I do believe they are implicated subjects with a responsibility to 'remember' the Holocaust by addressing and combatting its underlying racializing logics, among other things. And, of course, I realize that many Germans did benefit from the expropriation and murder of European Jews, but that does not capture the essence of the contemporary issue, as I see it.

**You just pointed out that implicated subjects who are structurally and genealogically connected to histories of perpetration have a responsibility to remember these histories. Could you say more about this memory 'in implication'? We wonder whether it would be possible to conceptualize it as a particular form of postmemory.**

Like many people, I have been deeply influenced by Marianne Hirsch's work on descendants of traumatized victims. While some people use postmemory to talk about the descendants of perpetrators, I am less comfortable with that. There are strong inter- and transgenerational dynamics at play on the perpetrator side, but I think they are not the same as the ones on the side of the victims and their descendants. Here, too, I think we've lacked a proper term, though Gabriele Schwab's notion of 'haunting legacies' and her account of growing up in the wake of National Socialism are significant contributions. In my vocabulary, the



descendants of perpetrators – and perpetrator societies – are implicated subjects, not members of the postmemory generation.

Postmemory does, however, play a slightly different role in my book – and that is with the concept of complex implication. As I've emphasized, implication is a matter of subject position, and subject positions are historically determined and shifting according to context. Thus, it is easily imaginable – and in fact quite common – to have lines of connection to both victim groups and perpetrators groups. Many of the knottier political situations today involve groups with a historical legacy of victimization who become implicated in forms of domination in the present. In the book, I consider this in relation to Israel/Palestine and also in relation to the situation of South African Jews, many of whom bear a postmemorial relation to the Holocaust but also found themselves implicated as white South Africans in the apartheid regime.

**In the third chapter of *The Implicated Subject*, you argue that multidirectional memory can offer a framework to explore implication. Could you elaborate on how these two concepts can be made to work together productively, particularly within a strongly interdisciplinary field such as perpetrator studies? What is the relationship between multidirectionality and interdisciplinarity?**

The concept of multidirectional memory plays an important role in *The Implicated Subject*, especially in the context of what I just called 'complex implication.' The short answer is that I see both remembrance and historical/political responsibility – the primary subject matter of the two books, respectively – as phenomena that inevitably cut across the borders of identities, social groups, and nations. Attending to the multidirectionality of memory thus becomes one way of tracking implication; such attention makes us receptive to the possibility of long-distance and non-intuitive connections in addition to organic and local forms of belonging. It also attunes us to what I called 'complex implication' – the possibility that those long-distance links position us in contradictory ways in relation to questions of justice and injustice.

Remembrance and responsibility are also essentially non-disciplinary objects of investigation; no field of study owns them, even if the emergence of the field of memory studies in the past couple of decades – and of perpetrator studies more recently – provides an interdisciplinary space for considerations of many of the key issues. I think almost all of the most important questions that humanists and social scientists (and

probably all other scholars) address are fundamentally interdisciplinary. I guess I just take that as a given.

**Throughout your book, you explore how artworks can enable us to experience what implication looks and feels like. Could you say more about this affective dimension of implication?**

I've just remarked on how intrinsically interdisciplinary my work is – and my sense of how non-disciplinary the objects that interest us are. That said, I still remain marked by disciplinary training in important ways and I also retain certain disciplinary commitments: above all, to the importance of close reading and critique (which go together in my mind). I believe in paying close attention to cultural texts – whether literary texts, works of visual art, or what have you. Such texts, I believe, give us a couple of different points of access to the question of implication. On the one hand, I read these texts as conceptual works in their own right; that is, I understand art as a form of medium-specific or inter-medial theorizing. Such theorizing reveals itself via close reading. The works I explore help us conceptualize different forms of implication and, for that matter, different forms of multidirectional memory and what I call 'long-distance solidarity.' On the other hand, as your question suggests, artworks also give us access to non-conceptual, affective realms.

Often, they do both simultaneously. In a famous passage in *A Small Place* that I discuss in *The Implicated Subject*, Jamaica Kincaid uses a rather scatological reference in addressing a fictional white tourist who goes for a swim in the Caribbean: 'You must not wonder what exactly happened to the contents of your lavatory when you flushed it,' she writes, 'the contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you wade carefree in the water.' The passage – and the text as a whole – helps us conceptualize various forms of synchronic and diachronic implication, as I argue in my book. But it also does something more. That reference to an intimate encounter with human waste produces a visceral, affectively powerful response on the part of the reader. That visceral response – that cringe – is meant to awaken white readers to their (our) own implication in both the unequal relations of the neocolonial present and in the sordid histories of slavery and colonialism. A critical work might do that too, but Kincaid uses very specific literary techniques – not least, direct address of the reader – to produce a particularly affective indictment of implication.

**In your final chapter you argue for a new political subject who both assumes and contests its own implicatedness. What role can and does art play in the development of such new political subjectivities? And what role does affect play?**

Kincaid's *A Small Place* and other works of visual art that I consider throughout the book aim to provoke a self-reflexivity about readers' and viewers' implication in various historical and contemporary systems of domination, violence, and exploitation. I believe self-reflexivity is an essential component of any subjectivity that aims at contesting those systems, but it is obviously not sufficient. While I don't believe we can eliminate implication in any total way – the dynamic, cross-cutting, and intersectional nature of social relations suggests otherwise – I do think, as I suggest in the theses I lay out in conclusion, that one of the goals of social movements is to transfigure implication: to minimize it and transform it into something else. That 'something else' is what I would want to call solidarity.

Solidarity is not an easy thing to accomplish and it is not a naturally existing force; it must be constructed between people and that takes all kinds of labor. The particular forms of solidarity that interest me are the ones that can never fall back on ideas of 'natural' belonging (itself a fiction), but are constructed precisely across boundaries of geographical, experiential, and identitarian difference. I call these forms 'differentiated' or 'long-distance' solidarity in order to capture the fact that they do not work via a logic of sameness, identification, or presumed proximity. Rather, the work of solidarity consists precisely in holding together that which is not expected or intended to cohere. (You can see the link to multidirectionality, I think.)

Art and culture more broadly are not substitutes for the hard work of building solidarity, but they can play a role in it. Similar to what I said above about art and implication, I'd say that art and solidarity are linked both cognitively and affectively. They can help us 'see' and understand the work of solidarity by creating images and narratives of social connection and movement. But they can also provide an affective charge that provokes feelings of solidarity through those images and narratives.

In the two examples with which I close my book, however, there is also a third, 'live' dimension to the intersection of art and solidarity. In the cases of Marceline Loridan-Ivens and Hito Steyerl, we find filmmakers who create particular forms of engaged art that aim at internationalist solidarity. Loridan-Ivens was a French Jewish survivor

of Auschwitz who went on to become a documentary filmmaker, working together with her partner Joris Ivens, in the era of decolonization and anti-imperialism. Steyerl, a German artist, is one of the most influential contemporary figures in the art world and has engaged in a long-term project involving video and performance related to the Kurdish question in Turkey and beyond. Neither of these cases offers any 'pure' and unproblematic form of long-distance solidarity; in part, they are valuable in exposing some of the traps that await those who embark on projects of solidarity (romanticization of the other, submission to propaganda, etc.). But they are also, in my opinion, inspiring examples of how the position of implicated subject can be mobilized in internationalist political causes. Steyerl, in particular, combines the kind of necessary self-reflexivity I described above about her own implication in the story she is telling with a proactive movement outwards that puts her in contact with people on the ground involved in the Kurdish struggle. To be sure, neither of these cases involves what I would consider 'typical' or easily imitable versions of solidarity via a grasp of implication, but I read them as usefully modeling both the limits and possibilities of such solidarity.

**One of the frontiers of perpetrator studies is the question of climate change and how to assign blame. Within the discourse on the Anthropocene, one of the chief criticisms has to do with the implication that a universal singular Anthropos, the human, is responsible for climate change and extinction, and that thus the very term obscures the true nature of culpability and responsibility for these effects. If everyone is guilty, then nobody is. Isn't the implicated subject open to a similar allegation? We are all to a greater or lesser extent implicated in histories and processes of violence and exploitation, processes that are usually completely beyond our control. So, in conclusion, could you say something about the potential problems/pitfalls and limitations of the concept?**

In putting forward the implicated subject and implication as categories for critical theory, I am deliberately offering something at a high level of generality. While there has been much – understandable and necessary – focus on the local and the particular in theory in recent decades, I believe theory needs to offer categories that can travel and operate across contexts. That said, there is of course a risk of over-generalization. My response is this: while I do believe that many of us are positioned as implicated subjects much of the time, that insight only becomes useful when

we investigate particular problems that concern us. In other words, precisely because the implicated subject is a subject position and not an ontological identity, we should be able to track its uneven salience across different times and spaces. We are not all equally implicated and certainly not in all scenarios. The work of critique is a work of intellectual differentiation and political judgment. My argument is that many, or even most, of the problems of power and violence that confront scholars and citizens would benefit from a factoring in of the problem of implication and of the position of implicated subjects. There has simply been a vast, relatively unmarked, but nevertheless critical terrain standing unaddressed at the heart of our analyses; I'm trying to provide some tools for addressing that terrain. That will require further acts of differentiation, however: the positing of implication is just the beginning, not the end point.

The particular question of climate change is an important one for thinking through these questions (as well as a crucial one for our collective survival, obviously). I do not engage with climate at length in *The Implicated Subject* – because it is not an area in which I feel particularly expert – but it was actually one of the first ‘problems’ that occurred to me as I was thinking about implication. I write about it briefly in the foreword I wrote to *The Future of Trauma Theory*, and others working in the area of climate change, like Richard Crownshaw, have picked up on it. My initial sense was that the concept of the implicated subject was useful in addressing the Anthropocene because it allowed us to come to terms with what Dipesh Chakrabarty called humans’ new ‘geological agency’: that is, our collective, but uncoordinated impact on the geology of the planet that has, over an extended period, resulted in a destructive climate crisis. It seems obvious that most of us are not ‘perpetrators’ of climate change, but, I asked, aren’t many of us – at least in the Global North – in fact implicated in it through our patterns of consumption that prop up an unsustainable global capitalism? I agree with those critics of Chakrabarty who argue that one can overstate the universal nature of this implication and thereby miss the radically unequal relations of what some have called the Capitalocene (along with other alternative formulations). But I think the theory of implication can help bring this inequality out – that’s really the whole point of the theory, not some metaphysical idea that ‘we’re all implicated’ (à la Karl Jaspers’s ‘metaphysical guilt’). At the same time, I can see that even this differentiated account of implication does not address the preponderant responsibility of corporations and states in producing the conditions of climate crisis. More work needs

to be done on this, but for the moment I'm left with the question of how to theorize the relation between global capitalism and the implication of privileged residents of the Global North. Without distorting the various degrees of responsibility at stake in the climate question, I think implication might still provide a starting point for thinking about how to transfigure our responsibility into concrete acts of solidarity with those more immediately impacted by the disruptions wrought by rising global temperatures.

A final word on the context of this interview: I've been responding to these questions while in the early days of COVID-19 disruption in the United States. Things are changing so rapidly that anything I say now is likely to be irrelevant next week – or even tomorrow. But we can already see that, as with the Anthropocene, we're dealing with a phenomenon that is truly global and universal in its impact, even as it will inevitably play out in radically uneven ways that we cannot even begin to imagine yet (though we can fear certain likelihoods). I certainly am not going to claim that the framework of implication is the best one for addressing this crisis – I actually have no idea what the best framework would be. I do think, though, that the way things are already playing out corresponds to one point I make in the book. In addition to the idea that vulnerability and precariousness represent shared characteristics that bind living beings to each other (a frequent idea in recent theory by Judith Butler and others), I suggest that our capacity to harm one another – even, or especially, in indirect ways – also characterizes our shared condition. Certainly, infectious disease is a realm in which we are dangerously implicated in the lives of vulnerable others (which is to say, potentially everyone). It is out of a sense of that indirect capacity for violence that we are being called upon to enact radical acts of solidarity – perhaps most obviously at the moment in the form of radical acts of isolation. If nothing else, we are urgently in need of new forms of long-distance solidarity.

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