

Beyond victims' rights: recognition, institutionalization and the construction of victimhood in contemporary criminal justice

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DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.16.09.2026.p17713

<https://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.16.09.2026.p17713>

Paper Received Date: 20th August 2026

Paper Acceptance Date: 9th September 2026

Paper Publication Date: 20th September 2026

Abstract – The rise of the victim to a central role in contemporary criminal justice represents one of the most significant transformations in the ways in which crime is defined and governed in late modernity. Historically marginalized within a state-centred paradigm, in which crime was interpreted primarily as an offence against public authority, the victim has progressively acquired a new symbolic, legal and institutional centrality. This paper offers a critical review of the literature on the 'victim turn', drawing on contributions from victimology, the sociology of punishment, the theory of recognition and studies on restorative justice. Moving beyond an interpretation that views this transformation as a mere expansion of victims' rights, the article analyses the processes through which the figure of the victim has been recognized, institutionalized and incorporated into the new rationalities of *penal governance*. The research identifies three complementary interpretative dimensions. The first concerns recognition, understood as the process through which suffering acquires moral and social significance; the second concerns institutionalization, through which the experience of harm is translated into legal, administrative and organizational categories; the third concerns penal governance, highlighting the symbolic role of the victim in the construction of contemporary narratives on security and social control. The article argues that the contemporary victim constitutes an ambivalent figure: simultaneously a subject of recognition, an institutional category and a political resource. Understanding the 'victim turn' therefore means analyzing the broader transformations in the relationship between suffering, justice and power in contemporary societies.

Index Terms – *victim turn*; victimology; recognition; institutionalization; criminal governance; restorative justice; social control.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the last forty years, the emergence of the victim as a central figure in contemporary criminal justice has represented one of the most significant transformations in the criminal justice systems of late modernity. Historically relegated to the margins of a state-centred paradigm, in which crime was interpreted primarily as an offence against public authority, the victim has progressively acquired a new legal, political and symbolic centrality. This transformation, referred to in criminological literature as the 'victim turn' (Garland, 2001), has profoundly altered the way in which harm, liability and justice are conceived in contemporary societies. The expansion of victims' rights, the development of support services, the introduction of *victim impact statements* and the spread of restorative justice practices bear witness to the scale of this change. At the supranational level, this process has been further consolidated through the recognition of the victim as a holder of fundamental rights, culminating in the adoption of Directive 2012/29/EU, which established common standards regarding protection, support and participation.

However, the growing centrality of the victim cannot be interpreted as merely the result of a progressive expansion of individual rights. It is the product of a more complex transformation, in which different processes — the moral demand for recognition, the institutional construction of victim status and the reorganization of the rationales underpinning criminal justice governance — intertwine, redefining the role of the victim within contemporary justice systems. Whilst, on the one hand, the 'victim turn' has helped to overcome the historical marginalization of victims, on the other, their growing visibility has been progressively integrated into new security strategies, criminal policies and the processes of legitimizing criminal intervention.

The central sociological issue, therefore, does not concern merely the victim's return to the public and institutional sphere, but the

conditions under which that return has been brought about and governed. Greater attention paid to suffering does not, in fact, necessarily coincide with greater autonomy for the victim: recognition may translate into participation and legitimization, but it may also entail processes of ‘classification, selection and regulation through which certain forms of harm gain visibility whilst others remain marginalized. Sociological reflection on the ‘victim turn’ has developed through different theoretical traditions, each analyzing specific dimensions of the phenomenon: victimology has reconstructed the processes through which the victim has become the subject of scientific knowledge and institutional intervention; studies on recognition have highlighted the moral and symbolic dimension of the demand for visibility; the sociology of punishment has analyzed the role of the victim in the transformations of contemporary punitive rationalities; finally, studies on restorative justice have explored the possibility of a form of participation capable of overcoming the traditional passive position of the victim.

This paper proposes an integrated interpretation of these perspectives, arguing that the ‘victim turn’ represents neither a linear process of victim emancipation nor a mere consequence of the expansion of criminal control. Rather, it constitutes a multidimensional transformation in which recognition, institutionalization and criminal governance operate simultaneously, producing new forms of visibility, participation and regulation of suffering. Through a critical review of criminological and sociological literature, the article reconstructs this transformation along three complementary interpretative axes: the victim as a moral subject of recognition, as an institutional category produced by legal and administrative mechanisms, and as a political figure through whom the relationships between security, responsibility and criminal power are redefined. The aim is therefore not to propose a new general theory of the victim, but to offer an interpretative framework capable of bringing together theoretical dimensions that are often analyzed separately, showing how the contemporary condition of the victim emerges from the interaction between moral, institutional and political processes.

II. FROM THE OWNERSHIP OF THE CONFLICT TO THE MARGINALISATION OF THE VICTIM: A GENEALOGY OF MODERN CRIMINAL JUSTICE

The victim’s current centrality in contemporary criminal justice can only be understood through a genealogical reconstruction of the processes that have led to their progressive marginalization within modern criminal justice systems. The emergence of the victim as a central figure in contemporary criminal discourse does not, in fact, represent a linear evolution of justice, but constitutes a significant reversal of a long historical process through which criminal conflict was progressively removed from the interpersonal sphere and brought under the authority of the state.

The consolidation of modern criminal justice is closely linked to the establishment of state sovereignty over the definition and management of crime. From a Weberian perspective (Weber, 1922/1978), this process coincides with the state’s gradual monopolization of legitimate coercion, which brings about the

transition from private forms of conflict management to a formalized system of the administration of justice. Crime thus ceases to be interpreted primarily as harm inflicted on an individual or a social relationship, and instead takes the form of a violation of public order and state authority. The victim, whilst remaining the person actually affected by the offence, gradually loses the symbolic ownership of the conflict, which is transferred to the institutional relationship between the state and the offender.

This transformation also takes on a moral and collective dimension. According to Durkheim (1893/1984), in modern societies characterized by organic solidarity, punishment primarily serves to reaffirm the collective consciousness and to restore the normative order that has been violated. The significance of the offence therefore lies not only in the harm caused to the individual victim, but in the symbolic threat that the criminal act poses to social integration. From this perspective, the victim’s suffering is subsumed within an institutional response primarily geared towards safeguarding the overall moral order.

It is precisely this transformation that Nils Christie (1977) analyses through the concept of ‘*conflict as property*’. According to Christie, the modern criminal justice system has progressively removed the conflict from its direct protagonists, transforming it into a technical object administered by legal professionals. The victim and the offender are thus progressively excluded from the possibility of independently processing the meaning of the harm and the response to it, whilst the conflict is redefined through legal categories and specialized procedures. The invisibility of the victim is therefore not merely an accidental consequence of the evolution of the criminal justice system, but the structural outcome of a model founded on the neutralization of conflict and the centrality of public authority.

The marginalization of the victim does not, however, imply their complete absence from the criminal justice system. The victim continues to fulfill procedural and evidential functions, but their subjective experience of the harm remains subordinate to the requirements of judicial investigation and the protection of public order. The modern criminal justice system thus produces a particular conception of the victim: recognized as a necessary element of the proceedings, but deprived of the ability to define independently the social and relational significance of the offence suffered.

The subsequent emergence of victimology, from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, marked an initial break with this model. The pioneering contributions of Hans von Hentig and Benjamin Mendelsohn introduced the victim as an autonomous object of scientific inquiry, shifting criminological attention beyond the exclusive focus on the offender. Although these approaches were subsequently criticized for the emphasis placed on vulnerability and ‘*victim precipitation*’, they represent the first step towards a redefinition of the victim as an analytical and institutional category. The issue no longer concerns merely their exclusion from the criminal justice system, but the processes through which they are progressively understood, classified and recognized.

It is upon this transformation that contemporary victimology, critical approaches to recognition, and analyses of the institutionalization of the victim in modern criminal justice will develop.

III. FROM MARGINALISATION TO VISIBILITY: THE EPISTEMIC CONSTRUCTION AND INSTITUTIONAL EMERGENCE OF THE VICTIM

The victim's current centrality in the criminal and social spheres is not the result of a mere empirical discovery, but the outcome of a historical and theoretical process through which the injured party has been progressively transformed into a subject who can be understood, recognized and institutionally protected. The construction of the contemporary victim can therefore be interpreted as the result of the interaction between three interconnected dimensions: the production of scientific knowledge regarding harm and vulnerability; the social and political processes of recognition; and, finally, the stabilization of the figure of the victim within legal and administrative frameworks.

Early approaches to victimology were rooted in a predominantly positivist perspective, focused on identifying the individual, situational and relational characteristics associated with processes of victimization. The pioneering contributions of Hans von Hentig (1948) and Benjamin Mendelsohn (1956) marked the emergence of victimology as an independent field of research, introducing a new focus on the victim of crime into criminology. Although operating within a predominantly aetiological paradigm, these studies represent the first systematic attempt to analyse the relationship between perpetrator and victim and to understand how individual, environmental and interactive factors might influence the dynamics of victimization (von Hentig, 1948; Mendelsohn, 1956).

The contribution of this initial phase lies not only in broadening the scope of criminological study, but above all in transforming the victim into a category open to observation, classification and empirical analysis. As Fattah (1992) highlights, victimology has progressively altered the very way in which the phenomenon of crime is understood, demonstrating how crime produces social and individual consequences that cannot be interpreted solely through the figure of the perpetrator. The victim thus acquires analytical significance in their own right and becomes a subject whose experience requires specific forms of scientific and institutional analysis.

From the 1970s onwards, this transformation was further consolidated by the spread of victimization surveys, epidemiological studies on victimization and comparative research aimed at measuring the distribution of the phenomenon, identifying risk factors and guiding policies on prevention, support and compensation (Sparks, Genn, & Dodd, 1977; Mawby & Walklate, 1994). The victim has gradually become part of the processes of institutional knowledge production: experiences of harm are recorded, quantified and translated into administrative categories that serve to shape support programmes, compensation schemes and regulatory reforms.

In this context, the contribution of David Miers takes on particular significance; through his analysis of compensation schemes and public policies aimed at victims, he demonstrates how contemporary societies have developed institutional mechanisms based on the legal and administrative definition of victim status (Miers, 1978, 1989). However, it is precisely the ' – the process through which a condition of suffering is made institutionally recognizable – that introduces a selective

dimension: not all experiences of harm are necessarily translated into the category of the legitimate victim. Defining who is eligible for recognition effectively means establishing which forms of vulnerability are socially and politically worthy of protection.

The institutional construction of the victim is therefore ambivalent in nature. On the one hand, it makes previously marginalised experiences visible, promoting forms of support, compensation and participation for the victim within the criminal justice system. On the other hand, it involves a normative classification of suffering, through eligibility criteria that can result in differential inclusion and hierarchies of victimization. The victim is therefore not merely an empirically identifiable individual, but a social and political category constructed through specific mechanisms of knowledge and recognition.

It is precisely this tension between visibility and selection that constitutes the starting point for critical victimology, which aims to challenge the presumed neutrality of the processes through which criminal law and institutions define the boundaries of legitimate victimization (Walklate, 2007; Rock, 2004). From this perspective, the analysis of the contemporary victim requires moving beyond an exclusively descriptive conception of the phenomenon in order to examine the social, political and institutional mechanisms through which certain experiences of harm are recognized, whilst others remain on the margins of protective mechanisms.

The victim's current centrality in the criminal and social spheres is not the result of a mere empirical discovery, but the outcome of a historical and theoretical process through which the injured party has been progressively transformed into a subject who can be understood, recognized and institutionally protected. The construction of the contemporary victim can therefore be interpreted as the result of the interaction between three interconnected dimensions: the production of scientific knowledge about harm and vulnerability; the social and political processes of recognition; and, finally, the consolidation of the figure of the victim within legal and administrative frameworks. Early victimological approaches were situated within a predominantly positivist perspective, focused on identifying the individual, situational and relational characteristics associated with processes of victimization. The pioneering contributions of Hans von Hentig (1948) and Benjamin Mendelsohn (1956) marked the emergence of victimology as an autonomous field of research, introducing a new focus within criminology on the person harmed by crime. Although operating within a predominantly aetiological paradigm, these studies represent the first systematic attempt to analyse the relationship between perpetrator and victim and to understand how individual, environmental and interactive factors might influence the dynamics of victimization (von Hentig, 1948; Mendelsohn, 1956).

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A. Positivist victimology and the scientific objectification of the victim's condition

The origins of systematic reflection on the victim lie within a predominantly positivist framework, geared towards identifying the aetiological patterns underlying the criminal event. The pioneering contributions of Hans von Hentig (1948) and Benjamin Mendelsohn (1956) marked a significant epistemological shift: for the first time, criminological attention moved away from an exclusive focus on the offender towards a relational perspective, in which the victim became the subject of an independent scientific investigation.

Whilst remaining anchored to an aetiological paradigm — subsequently criticized for its emphasis on '*victim precipitation*' and situational vulnerability — these studies had the merit of transforming the victim from a marginal figure in criminal

proceedings into an analytical category open to observation,

classification and empirical interpretation (von Hentig, 1948; Mendelsohn, 1956).

As Fattah (1992) observes, this initial phase does not merely expand the scope of traditional criminology, but helps to reconfigure the criminal phenomenon as a complex relationship between perpetrator, victim and social context. The victim thus acquires theoretical significance in their own right and becomes a subject whose experience requires specific forms of scientific analysis.

This process was decisively consolidated from the 1970s onwards with the spread of *victimization surveys* and epidemiological studies on victimization (Sparks, Genn and Dodd, 1977). These tools not only make it possible to identify the so-called 'dark figure' of crime, but also provide public institutions with a new knowledge base for defining policies on prevention, support and compensation. From this perspective, David Miers's work (1978; 1989) highlights how the production of empirical data on victimization has facilitated the development of compensation and support systems, transforming individual suffering into a matter subject to public regulation.

B. Critical victimology: recognition, power asymmetries and the social construction of victimhood

From the 1980s onwards, the descriptive and classificatory approach of positivist victimology has been progressively challenged by critical victimology, which shifts the focus from the characteristics of the victim to the social and institutional processes through which victim status is produced and recognized. From this perspective, victimization is not a purely objective fact or a natural consequence of the offence, but the result of cultural and political dynamics that attribute meaning to suffering and determine its public visibility (Walklate, 2007). The central theoretical issue no longer concerns solely the identification of the victim, but the analysis of the mechanisms through which some individuals are recognized as legitimate victims whilst others remain excluded from protective measures. Sandra Walklate (2007) highlights how this process is influenced by structural variables such as gender, social class, ethnicity and social respectability. Not all experiences of harm, in fact, achieve the same level of public recognition: there is a hierarchy of suffering based on implicit moral criteria that determine which forms of vulnerability are deemed worthy of protection.

This perspective ties in with Nils Christie's (1986) reflection on the concept of the 'ideal victim'. According to Christie, the criminal justice system and the media tend to favor a stereotypical model of the victim — weak, innocent, unrelated to the perpetrator and harmed by an individual perceived as fully responsible for the harm caused — which becomes the benchmark for moral legitimization and access to rights. Victimization thus takes on a selective nature: the possibility of being recognized as a victim also depends on conformity to specific social standards of respectability (Rock, 2004; Walklate, 2007). From this perspective, recognition is not merely a response to suffering, but a

political process through which the boundaries of dignity, citizenship and social protection are defined (Honneth, 1995).

C. *Institutionalization and the victim as an administrative category*

does not automatically acquire public significance: for an

The most significant outcome of the '*victim turn*' is the process of institutionalization through which the demand for recognition of the victim is progressively incorporated into the state's regulatory, organizational and professional frameworks. As Paul Rock (2004) highlights, the central role assumed by the victim in late modernity does not stem exclusively from a greater ethical sensitivity towards harm, but from the construction of administrative and professional apparatuses designed to manage it. The development of support services, procedural reforms and specialized procedures has, in fact, led to the permanent integration of the victim into the institutional architecture of the criminal justice system (Rock, 2002). However, this process is ambivalent in nature. Whilst institutionalization has enabled forms of protection, participation and recognition that were previously marginal, it has also required the translation of the experience of harm into legal categories and operational procedures compatible with the administrative functioning of the system.

The transformation of the victim into an institutional category therefore entails an inevitable simplification of the complexity of trauma: the individual experience of suffering is filtered through eligibility criteria, formal procedures and organizational standards that enable the administrative management of the phenomenon (Rock, 2004; Walklate, 2007). The contemporary victim thus assumes an ambivalent role: they are simultaneously a subject with rights and an object of institutional regulation. The very mechanisms that guarantee their visibility also define the limits of their agency and recognizability, determining what can be translated into the formal language of justice and what remains excluded. This transformation forms the basis for understanding the new rationalities of contemporary criminal *governance*, in which the victim no longer represents merely the recipient of public protection, but also becomes a symbolic and political resource through which criminal policies and new forms of the exercise of punitive power are legitimized.

IV. RECOGNITION, MORAL VALUE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF VICTIM IDENTITY

The institutionalization of victims within contemporary criminal justice systems raises a fundamental sociological question: what processes enable an individual who has suffered harm to be recognized as a legitimate victim? The expansion of victims' rights and their growing prominence in the public sphere have not eliminated conflicts relating to the ' ' recognition; on the contrary, they have made these conflicts more evident, transforming them into issues concerning moral dignity, social legitimacy and the boundaries of institutional inclusion. The condition of being a victim cannot, in fact, be interpreted exclusively as a direct consequence of a harmful event. A distinction must be drawn between *victimization*, understood as a concrete experience of suffering or violation, and *victimhood*, understood as a social and symbolic status produced through processes of interpretation, recognition and legitimization. Harm

individual to be recognized as a victim, their experience must be made intelligible within specific moral, cultural and institutional frameworks. The victim therefore constitutes not only a legal or administrative category, but also a moral position within society. Being recognized as a victim means obtaining public validation of one's suffering and having the social significance of the harm suffered acknowledged. From this perspective, recognition also takes on a restorative function at a symbolic level, since criminal harm represents a breach in the relationships of trust and in the normative expectations that govern social coexistence (Walker, 2006). However, such recognition is not distributed evenly: it depends on cultural and institutional criteria that define which forms of suffering are considered worthy of protection.

4.A Recognition and the moral demand for visibility

The theory of recognition developed by Axel Honneth (1995) provides a fundamental theoretical framework for understanding the contemporary centrality of victims. According to Honneth, the construction of individual identity depends on various forms of social recognition: care in primary relationships, legal recognition of one's autonomy and rights, and social esteem through which an individual's capabilities are regarded as significant by the community to which they belong. Conversely, experiences of contempt and a lack of recognition inflict a moral wound that undermines one's sense of dignity and social belonging (Honneth, 1995). Applied to victimization, this perspective allows us to interpret crime not merely as material or psychological harm, but as a symbolic violation of the social relationship: the harm effectively conveys a denial of the other's value and disrupts fundamental expectations of respect and reciprocity.

Victims' demand for recognition therefore concerns not only legal protection or financial compensation, but also the possibility that their experience may be publicly acknowledged as morally significant. From this perspective, the '*victim turn*' can be seen as a transformation of the moral expectations of contemporary societies, in which the lack of recognition of suffering tends to be interpreted as an independent form of injustice. However, recognition is not a universal process: it is mediated by cultural and institutional norms that determine which experiences may acquire moral visibility.

4.B The politics of recognition and the hierarchies of victimhood

The critique developed by Nancy Fraser (2000) of Honneth's theory of recognition enables us to analyse the selective nature of the processes through which some victims gain social visibility whilst others remain marginalized. Whilst Honneth highlights the moral dimension of recognition, Fraser emphasizes that it cannot be separated from the material structures, power relations and institutional conditions that organize society. Recognition is therefore not a neutral process, but a field traversed by social and cultural

hierarchies that influence which individuals and which forms of suffering are deemed publicly relevant. Applied to the victim, this perspective helps us understand why some experiences of harm are quickly legitimized whilst others face greater difficulties in being recognized.

The visibility of suffering depends, in fact, on the possibility of fitting into socially established narratives based on vulnerability, innocence and the absence of responsibility. Victims who do not fit these representations may experience forms of delegitimization or suspicion, demonstrating how access to victimhood is influenced by implicit moral criteria. In this sense, recognition becomes a terrain of political negotiation in which the boundaries of social protection, dignity and moral citizenship are defined.

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4.C The 'ideal victim' and the moral construction of legitimacy

The concept of the 'ideal victim' developed by Nils Christie (1986) is a key tool for understanding the mechanisms through which society attributes legitimacy to the status of victimhood. According to Christie, the recognition of a victim does not depend solely on the existence of harm, but also on the individual's ability to meet specific cultural expectations regarding innocence, vulnerability and moral respectability. The ideal victim is generally portrayed as a weak, defenseless individual, engaged in a socially legitimate activity and bearing no responsibility for the event they have suffered. At the same time, this portrayal requires the construction of a perpetrator who is clearly identifiable and morally distant from the victim.

This portrayal facilitates public empathy and makes the institutional response more immediate, but it also has selective effects. Those who do not fit the dominant model — stigmatized people, marginalized individuals or victims of structural harm — may face greater obstacles in gaining full recognition.

Victimhood thus emerges through social processes of meaning-making in which the criteria of innocence, vulnerability and deservingness are continually negotiated.

4.D Recognition, victimhood and institutional boundaries

The debate on recognition highlights the ambivalent nature of contemporary policies aimed at victims. On the one hand, the expansion of rights, support services and forms of participation has enabled previously marginalized experiences to gain public visibility and institutional relevance. On the other hand, every process of recognition involves a selection: to be integrated into institutional systems, suffering must be translated into shared normative and interpretative categories.

The victim is therefore simultaneously recognized and regulated through the very mechanisms that promote their protection. These mechanisms can produce empowerment and legitimization, but they can also establish implicit criteria regarding the victim's credibility and the recognizability of the harm suffered.

Understanding the '*victim turn*' therefore requires moving beyond an exclusively progressive interpretation of recognition. The central sociological issue concerns not merely the fact that victims have gained greater prominence in the public sphere, but the way in which this visibility is produced, organized and governed through moral judgments, institutional procedures and power relations.

The recognition of the victim is thus an ambivalent phenomenon:

also become a mechanism through which suffering is classified and made compatible with specific institutional rationalities. It is against this tension that the subsequent analysis of the transformations in contemporary criminal justice and new forms of *penal governance* is set.

and new public expectations of the criminal justice system. In this context, the victim has taken on an increasingly central role, not

V. VICTIMS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CRIMINAL GOVERNANCE

The growing institutional visibility of victims has not only altered the position of the victim within criminal justice systems, but has also helped to transform the rationalities through which contemporary societies define, interpret and govern crime. With the emergence of the '*victim turn*', individual suffering has gradually become a public and political issue: the victim no longer represents merely the recipient of protection and recognition, but also a symbolic figure through whom collective representations of insecurity, responsibility and social order are constructed.

In this process, the victim's experience takes on a function that extends beyond the specific individual case. Narratives of suffering help to define which risks are considered a priority, which behaviors require a criminal justice response, and which forms of intervention are deemed socially legitimate. The victim thus becomes a point of reference through which contemporary societies negotiate the relationship between protection and punishment, and between the demand for security and the aspiration for justice.

The '*victim turn*' cannot, therefore, be interpreted solely as an expansion of victims' rights or as a mere correction of their previous institutional marginalization. It constitutes a broader transformation of *penal governance*, in which the figure of the victim influences legislative reforms, criminal policies, judicial practices and public representations of crime. As highlighted by Garland (2001), this transformation is situated within the broader reconfiguration of contemporary penal culture, characterized by the centrality of the fear of crime, the crisis of the rehabilitative model and the search for new forms of social control and reassurance.

The centrality of the victim thus takes on an ambivalent nature: it represents both an achievement in terms of recognition and participation, and a symbolic resource through which the aims of punishment are redefined and new punitive strategies legitimized.

5.A *The culture of control and the symbolic centrality of victims*

David Garland's (2001) analysis of the '*culture of control*' constitutes one of the key points of reference for understanding the role assumed by victims in the transformation of contemporary criminal justice. According to Garland, since the end of the 20th century, the model of the *penal welfare state* – founded on the rehabilitation of the offender and on prevention through individualized treatment – has progressively entered a state of crisis.

This transformation has been accompanied by a growing perception of insecurity, greater attention to criminal risk

only as the recipient of protection, but as a symbolic reference point through which the purposes of punishment are redefined.

The language of criminal justice, in fact, tends to be organized increasingly around the victim's suffering, the need for recognition and the demand for collective protection. The victim thus becomes a moral figure through whom questions of security and accountability are articulated.

However, Garland highlights a fundamental tension: the elevation of the victim may represent a response to the previous exclusion of the aggrieved party, but it may also be incorporated into new punitive rationalities, becoming a symbolic mechanism through which criminal control is reinforced.

linked to the weakening of the social functions of the welfare

5.B Governing through crime: victims and the expansion of penal rationalities

The perspective developed by Jonathan Simon (2007) broadens the analysis by showing how crime has progressively become a general framework through which contemporary societies interpret and govern broader social problems. In **Governing Through Crime**, Simon highlights how criminal justice has progressively extended its influence beyond traditional boundaries, transforming itself into a mode of governance capable of guiding institutional decisions, administrative practices and public representations of security.

Within this political framework, the victim assumes a central role because they embody the vulnerable citizen exposed to risk and in need of protection. Security is thus redefined as the state's capacity to anticipate and control potential threats.

The figure of the victim therefore contributes to the construction of a specific political framework based on vulnerability, prevention and the management of uncertainty. This does not mean that victims' needs are artificial or irrelevant, but that their public representation can take on broader political meanings than the individual's personal experience alone.

The '*victim turn*' is therefore part of a transformation in which the discourse on victim protection contributes to the redefinition of the relationship between the citizen, the State and criminal justice.

5.C Security, risk and the penal state

The contemporary centrality of the victim must also be situated within broader transformations relating to security, risk and the configuration of the state in late modernity. From this perspective, the work of John Pratt and Loïc Wacquant helps us to understand how the '*victim turn*' reflects deeper social and political changes.

Pratt (2007), through his analysis of penal populism, highlights the growing influence of public emotions, media representations and collective demands for security in the formulation of criminal policies. The suffering of victims thus acquires a particular symbolic power, transforming into a public demand for protection and control.

Wacquant (2009), on the other hand, offers a structural interpretation of the expansion of the penal system, viewing it as part of the transformation of the state in neoliberal societies. From this perspective, the strengthening of penal control is

state and to the need to govern, through repressive means, the conditions of insecurity produced by economic and social inequalities.

Although they start from different perspectives, Pratt and Wacquant agree in highlighting that the centrality of the victim cannot be understood exclusively as a phenomenon internal to the criminal justice system. It reflects broader transformations in the ways in which contemporary societies define risk, construct security and confer legitimacy upon punitive power.

5.D Between recognition and incorporation into penal governance

The relationship between victim recognition and *penal governance* highlights one of the fundamental tensions of the 'victim turn'. The emergence of the victim as a recognized subject represents a significant transformation of contemporary penal systems, as it has enabled the expansion of procedural rights, support services and forms of participation.

However, the centrality of the victim can be incorporated into political rationalities oriented towards security, risk management and the expansion of criminal control. Individual suffering can, in fact, be transformed into a public discourse of vulnerability capable of legitimizing interventions that go beyond the protection of the victim.

This does not imply viewing victims as passive instruments of criminal justice policies. Such an interpretation would deny their subjectivity and capacity for action. The 'victim turn' must rather be interpreted as an ambivalent process in which the victim is simultaneously a moral subject demanding recognition, an institutional actor holding new rights, and a symbolic figure through whom collective demands for order and security are articulated.

The central sociological question therefore does not concern whether the 'victim turn' is exclusively emancipatory or punitive, but rather which institutional conditions enable the recognition of the victim to translate into effective participation and the transformation of social relations, rather than being limited to the administrative management of suffering.

This tension paves the way for restorative justice, which proposes a different conception of the victim—not merely as the recipient of criminal protection or a symbol of the demand for security, but as a relational subject involved in defining harm, liability and the processes of redress.

VI. RESTORATIVE JUSTICE AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF VICTIM PARTICIPATION

The growing centrality of victims in contemporary criminal justice has produced a fundamental paradox: increased institutional visibility has not always coincided with an effective capacity for action (*agency*) within the justice process. Although victims have acquired new procedural rights, forms of protection and opportunities for formal participation, their involvement has often remained mediated by professionals, administrative procedures and institutional

frameworks that are still predominantly centred on the relationship between the state and the offender.

This tension between formal recognition and substantive participation constitutes one of the theoretical foundations of restorative justice, which proposes a different interpretation of crime, responsibility and the role of those involved. Unlike the traditional criminal justice paradigm, which tends to define crime as a violation of a legal norm and of state authority, restorative approaches interpret it as a rupture in social relationships involving the victim, the offender and the community (Zehr, 1990; Braithwaite, 2002).

From this perspective, justice is not limited to establishing guilt and imposing punishment, but encompasses processes aimed at understanding the harm caused, taking responsibility and rebuilding damaged relationships. The victim is therefore not merely the recipient of protection or compensation, but becomes an active participant with a voice in defining the nature of the harm and the paths to redress.

Restorative justice thus introduces a different conception of the victim: no longer merely the object of institutional protection or a symbol of the demand for security, but an active participant in the construction of shared responses to conflict.

6.A From victim protection to participation

Howard Zehr's work represents one of the main critiques of traditional conceptions of criminal justice and the marginal role historically attributed to victims. In *Changing Lenses* (1990) and subsequently in *The Little Book of Restorative Justice* (2002), Zehr highlights how the retributive model is predominantly organized around the breach of the law and the attribution of blame.

The restorative perspective, by contrast, raises different questions: who has been harmed, what needs have arisen from the harm, and what responsibilities must be assumed by those involved. This shift implies a redefinition of the very meaning of crime, which is no longer interpreted merely as an offence against the authority of the state, but as a disruption of social relationships that requires processes of understanding and reconstruction.

From this perspective, the victim's participation takes on a broader significance than the role traditionally attributed to them in criminal proceedings. It does not consist merely of giving evidence or receiving protection, but includes the opportunity to express the meaning of their lived experience, articulate their needs and contribute to defining pathways of accountability.

The theory of '*reintegrative shaming*' developed by Braithwaite (1989; 2002) further elaborates on this relational dimension, arguing that the response to crime must condemn the harmful act without resulting in the permanent exclusion of the perpetrator. Through the involvement of victims and the community, restorative processes aim to rebuild damaged social bonds, enabling the victim to take an active role in defining the harm and the offender to confront the consequences of their actions.

6.B Restorative justice as a different rationale for justice

From a sociological perspective, restorative justice should not be interpreted simply as a set of procedures alternative to the existing criminal justice system, but as a different rationale for

justice based on an alternative conception of crime, responsibility and social relations.

Modern criminal justice has historically been organised around the definition of crime as a violation of the law and, consequently, as an offence against the authority of the state. In this model, the central relationship is that between the state and the offender, whilst the victim primarily assumes a procedural role.

The restorative perspective alters this framework by placing the relationships compromised by the harm back at the centre. Dialogue, participation, accountability and mutual recognition become the principles through which justice is conceived as a social process of conflict resolution and the rebuilding of trust.

As highlighted by Johnstone and Van Ness (2007), restorative justice represents a paradigm shift because it redefines the very problem to which justice must respond: crime is not merely a legal violation to be punished, but a situation of relational harm that requires dialogue, accountability and reparation.

From this perspective, the victim's voice is not merely an informative element of the proceedings, but contributes to defining the nature of the harm and the possibilities for redress.

6.C Between empowerment and institutionalization

Despite its transformative potential, restorative justice is subject to a significant tension concerning the relationship between participation and institutionalisation. The gradual integration of restorative practices into formal criminal justice systems raises a central question: do these practices manage to retain their transformative capacity, or do they risk being absorbed by the organizational logics they originally set out to criticize?

Institutionalization should not be viewed as exclusively negative. It has enabled restorative justice to gain stability, public recognition and procedural safeguards. However, incorporation into administrative and legal frameworks can introduce new forms of regulation capable of altering the original meaning of participation.

As Johnstone (2011) observes, one of the key challenges facing contemporary restorative justice lies precisely in preserving the balance between open dialogue and institutional formalisation. Practices designed to foster autonomy, flexibility and direct involvement may gradually become subject to professional standards and organizational criteria that limit their transformative potential.

In the Italian context, Mannozi and Lodigiani (2017) have highlighted how restorative justice represents a significant opportunity to move beyond an exclusively punitive conception of crime and to strengthen the role of victims. Such a development, however, requires that certain fundamental elements be preserved: voluntariness, the centrality of relationships and the adaptability of processes to the specific nature of conflicts.

The central issue is therefore not whether restorative justice should be institutionalized, but which institutional conditions will enable it to retain its capacity to foster recognition, participation and the rebuilding of social relationships.

6.D Reconfiguring the victim's position: beyond protection and punishment

interpreted through three main sociological frameworks:

The most significant contribution of restorative justice lies in its ability to redefine the role of the victim beyond the traditional dichotomy between institutional protection and punitive response. It proposes, in fact, an approach based on participation, dialogue and relational responsibility.

The victim's participation thus takes on a broader meaning than the mere formal recognition of rights: it becomes a means through which to contribute to defining the harm, establishing accountability and potentially rebuilding the relationships compromised by the crime.

In this sense, restorative justice is not merely a further development of the '*victim turn*', but challenges the very way in which justice is organized, shifting the focus from the administration of punishment to the governance of social relations and processes of reparation.

The transformation of the contemporary victim can therefore be understood through three complementary configurations: the victim as a subject of recognition, as an institutional category, and as an actor in relational reparation. Restorative justice represents the most radical attempt to move beyond a conception of the victim based exclusively on vulnerability, restoring to them the capacity to speak, participate and exercise agency in the management of conflict.

VII. CRITICAL DISCUSSION: THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE 'VICTIM TURN'

The '*victim turn*' cannot be adequately understood through a one-dimensional perspective, nor can it be interpreted as a linear process of simply expanding victims' rights. Rather, the growing centrality of the victim in contemporary justice represents the result of the interaction between different transformations that have simultaneously affected criminal justice systems, welfare institutions, moral cultures and contemporary forms of security governance.

The literature analyzed shows, in fact, how different theoretical approaches have shed light on complementary dimensions of the same process. Victimology has highlighted the victim's transition from a marginalized subject to an object of scientific knowledge and institutional intervention; theories of recognition have shown how the condition of being a victim entails a moral demand for visibility and legitimization; the sociology of punishment has highlighted the victim's role in the transformations of contemporary punitive rationalities; finally, restorative justice has opened up the possibility of participation grounded in relationship and the reconstruction of social bonds.

These perspectives should not be regarded as alternative interpretations, but as different analytical levels through which to understand the transformation of the victim's condition in contemporary societies. The '*victim turn*' thus emerges as a multidimensional process in which moral recognition, institutionalization and criminal governance intertwine, simultaneously producing new forms of inclusion and new modes of regulating suffering.

In light of this analysis, the contemporary victim can be

1. *The victim as a moral subject of recognition*, that is, a figure who claims dignity, visibility and public validation of their experience of harm.
2. *The victim as an institutional category*, that is, a subject made recognizable through legal, administrative and organizational mechanisms that define criteria for access, legitimacy and protection.
3. *The victim as a resource for criminal governance*, that is, a symbolic figure through whom demands for security, risk control and the legitimization of punitive intervention are articulated.

7.A The victim as a moral subject: recognition, dignity and social legitimacy

The first perspective interprets the victim as a subject involved in a quest for recognition. The growing centrality of victims in contemporary societies does not, in fact, concern exclusively a transformation of criminal justice institutions, but reflects a broader shift in moral and expectations through which individuals claim dignity, visibility and a sense of belonging following an experience of harm.

Theories of recognition, in particular Honneth's (1995) contribution, help us understand how victimization does not merely produce material or psychological consequences, but may also represent a violation of the normative expectations of respect and integrity that underpin social relations. Public recognition of suffering thus becomes part of the process through which harm acquires social and moral significance.

From this perspective, the '*victim turn*' can be interpreted as a process of moral inclusion through which previously marginalized experiences have gained public visibility and institutional relevance. However, this process is not automatically universal. As highlighted by Fraser (2000) and critical victimology, access to the status of a legitimate victim remains conditioned by social hierarchies, cultural representations and implicit criteria of merit.

The victim as a moral subject thus emerges within a fundamental tension: recognition represents a gain in dignity and inclusion, but at the same time it reveals the social mechanisms through which certain forms of suffering are accorded greater legitimacy than others.

7.B The victim as an institutional category: classification, regulation and the administrative production of legitimacy

A second perspective analyses the victim as the product of institutional processes that define their recognizability, protection and participation. The contemporary centrality of the victim does not, in fact, stem exclusively from a greater moral focus on suffering, but also from the progressive construction of regulatory, administrative and professional frameworks tasked with identifying and managing them.

As highlighted by Miers, the development of victimology, compensation schemes and support services has transformed

victimization into a recognizable condition within specific institutional frameworks. In parallel, Rock has shown how the victim has been progressively incorporated into the architecture

of criminal justice through organizational and professional legal, administrative and professional categories. practices that have defined their rights, needs and legitimate forms of participation.

This transformation, however, is ambivalent in nature. On the one hand, institutionalization has enabled victims to obtain protection, recognition and resources that were previously lacking. On the other hand, it inevitably involves processes of selection and translation through which complex experiences of suffering are reduced to administrative categories that serve the purposes of institutional governance.

The contemporary victim thus appears as a dual figure: a moral agent who demands recognition and an institutional category produced through practices of classification, regulation and legitimization.

7.C The victim as a political resource of criminal governance

A third perspective situates the victim within the transformations of contemporary criminal governance, analyzing the way in which the victim has become part of processes through which states define crime, security and the legitimacy of criminal intervention.

Studies by Garland (2001), Simon (2007), Pratt (2007) and Wacquant (2009) have shown how the growing public prominence of the victim is linked to a redefinition of the ways in which contemporary societies interpret risk and construct responses to insecurity. Individual suffering can, in fact, take on a broader political dimension, becoming a symbolic reference point through which demands for protection, control and social order are articulated.

This does not mean reducing victims to passive instruments of criminal policy. On the contrary, the sociologically relevant point lies in recognizing the ambivalent nature of their position: the victim is simultaneously a holder of rights and a symbolic figure through whom criminal justice institutions redefine their own objectives.

The '*victim turn*' therefore represents not only a greater focus on those who suffer harm, but also a transformation in the ways in which contemporary criminal justice builds consensus, interprets insecurity and redefines the relationship between protection and punishment.

7.D The institutional production of victimhood: recognition, classification and criminal governance

Taken together, the three perspectives analyzed show that the '*victim turn*' does not simply consist of the gradual inclusion of the victim within the criminal justice system, but rather a process through which different demands for recognition are translated, selected and mobilized within specific institutional and political frameworks. It is precisely in the interaction between these dimensions that the sociologically ambivalent nature of the contemporary centrality of the victim emerges.

The demand for recognition constitutes the starting point of this process, as it expresses the need for the experience of harm to acquire visibility, legitimacy and public relevance. However, once this demand is incorporated into institutions, it cannot be accepted in its original complexity, but must be translated into

Institutionalization therefore represents both a condition enabling recognition and a process of selecting what is recognizable. What is recognized as a victim's experience must, in fact, be capable of being classified, documented and processed through specific institutional mechanisms.

This tension allows us to question the notion that the expansion of victims' rights necessarily coincides with a linear broadening of recognition. Institutionalization can bring about inclusion, protection and access to resources, but it can also introduce new thresholds of legitimacy. The administrative translation of suffering involves, in fact, the construction of criteria through which to distinguish between recognizable forms of harm and forms of suffering that are less easily translatable into institutional languages. In this sense, the category of the victim is not only recognized by institutions, but is also progressively defined through them.

It is at this juncture that Fraser's (2000) perspective takes on particular significance. If recognition is regarded as a matter of justice, it is not enough to question the growing public visibility of the victim; one must also analyze the social and institutional conditions that determine who can be recognized and on what terms. The '*victim turn*' can therefore be understood as a process that is both inclusive and differential: whilst it broadens the public space for suffering, it also helps to construct hierarchies amongst different experiences of victimhood. These hierarchies become particularly evident when the victim is mobilized within *penal governance*. Indeed, the centrality of the victim is not confined to the realm of individual protection, but enters into the narratives through which risk, security and the legitimacy of punitive intervention are defined. As highlighted by Garland (2001), Simon (2007), Pratt (2007) and Wacquant (2009), contemporary transformations in the penal system have progressively incorporated new ways of building consensus and managing insecurity. In this context, the figure of the victim can become a symbolic resource through which certain forms of vulnerability are made visible and, at the same time, certain representations of crime and the criminal justice response are reinforced.

It is precisely at this level that Christie's concept of the '*ideal victim*' takes on central interpretative significance. The victim does not enter the public sphere solely by virtue of the objective experience of harm, but through social representations that attribute varying degrees of credibility, innocence and deservingness to different victimized individuals. The figure of the '*ideal victim*' — characterized by a socially recognizable position of vulnerability and innocence and contrasted with a perpetrator perceived as clearly responsible — is particularly compatible with the narrative requirements of criminal governance. Indeed, it allows for the construction of a morally simplified representation of the conflict, in which the victim's suffering simultaneously legitimizes the demand for protection and the intervention of the punitive authority. From this perspective, criminal governance does not merely utilize a predefined category of victim, but contributes itself to its selection and public promotion. Certain victim profiles are more compatible with security-oriented narratives because they can be portrayed as innocent, vulnerable and unambiguous

with regard to the conflict. Other experiences, characterized by marginalized social circumstances, complex relationships with the perpetrator,

behavior perceived as ambivalent, or forms of victimization that are less immediately recognizable, may, by contrast, face greater difficulties in achieving full public legitimacy.

The tension between recognition and criminal governance thus becomes particularly significant. The very figure that arises from a demand for dignity and inclusion can subsequently be mobilized to support narratives based on protection, control and punishment. The recognition of suffering does not necessarily lose its emancipatory dimension, but it can be embedded within institutional rationalities that differ from those which had originally fuelled the demand for recognition. In this sense, the inclusion of the victim in contemporary justice does not eliminate power dynamics, but can transform the ways in which they operate.

This results in a circular but not merely repetitive relationship between the three dimensions under consideration. The moral demand for recognition drives institutionalization; institutionalization translates this demand into categories and procedures that establish differential conditions of access to legitimacy; criminal governance may subsequently mobilize these categories to construct narratives of security, accountability and order. In turn, this political mobilization can influence what institutions consider to be a socially recognizable victim deserving of protection. The '*victim turn*' thus appears as a dynamic process in which recognition, classification and the governance of harm mutually condition one another.

This interpretation also makes it possible to move beyond an overly stark dichotomy between an emancipatory conception and a security-oriented conception of the centrality of the victim. The growing focus on victims has indeed produced new forms of visibility, protection and participation, but these achievements cannot be viewed in isolation from the processes through which institutions define the categories of recognition and the rationales of governance. The sociologically relevant question is therefore not whether the '*victim turn*' represents progress or regression, but rather to understand what forms of victimhood it makes possible, what institutional conditions it requires, and what hierarchies of legitimacy it may simultaneously produce.

From this perspective, the contemporary victim should not be conceived as a stable, pre-existing category that institutions merely recognize. Rather, it emerges from the interaction between the experience of harm, the demand for recognition, processes of institutional classification and practices of governance. *Victimhood* thus becomes a socially and institutionally produced condition, the meaning of which depends on the relationships between actors, institutions and forms of power that progressively define its boundaries.

It is precisely this dynamic that suggests the need for a sociology of victimhood capable of shifting the focus from the mere expansion of rights to the social production of victim legitimacy. Studying the '*victim turn*' means, in other words, examining not only the way in which the victim has been reintegrated into the criminal justice system, but also the processes through which certain experiences of suffering are made recognizable, institutionally addressable and politically mobilizable, whilst others remain more difficult to represent and legitimize. The contemporary transformation of the victim therefore lies not only in their growing centrality, but in the redefinition of the criteria through which a person, an experience of harm and a demand for

justice are socially recognized as belonging to the condition of victimhood.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

The emergence of the victim as a central figure in contemporary criminal justice represents one of the most significant transformations of criminal justice systems in late modernity. As this article has shown, the '*victim turn*' cannot be interpreted simply as a linear process of expanding victims' rights, nor as a gradual correction of their historical institutional marginalization. Rather, it constitutes a complex transformation of the ways in which contemporary societies define harm, attribute responsibility and construct the legitimacy of criminal intervention.

By drawing on victimology, recognition theory, the sociology of punishment and studies on restorative justice, this article has proposed an integrated interpretation of the '*victim turn*', bringing together theoretical perspectives that are often developed separately. These approaches do not represent competing interpretations, but rather complementary analytical dimensions through which to understand the progressive reconfiguration of the victim's status in contemporary justice.

The analysis has highlighted three main dynamics. Firstly, the central role acquired by the victim reflects a transformation in contemporary moral expectations, in which harm is no longer interpreted exclusively as a violation of a legal norm, but also as an infringement of relationships of recognition, dignity and social belonging. Secondly, this demand for recognition has been progressively incorporated into institutions through legal, administrative and organizational mechanisms that have expanded the possibilities for protection and participation, but which have simultaneously introduced classification criteria capable of determining which forms of suffering are made visible and which remain marginalized. Thirdly, the victim has become part of the new rationalities of *penal governance*, assuming a symbolic role in the construction of contemporary narratives on security, risk and the legitimization of punitive power.

This threefold perspective enables us to move beyond a dichotomous interpretation of the '*victim turn*', which oscillates between emancipatory celebration and security-oriented criticism. The contemporary victim is neither exclusively a product of the advancement of rights nor simply a tool of the state's punitive strategies. They emerge as an ambivalent and relational figure, produced by the interaction between processes of moral recognition, institutional practices and political rationalities. Their centrality thus reveals a deeper transformation in the way contemporary societies organize the relationship between individual suffering, collective responsibility and justice.

From this perspective, a sociology of the victim cannot be limited to the analysis of legislative reforms or the expansion of procedural safeguards, but must examine the processes through which the condition of victimhood is constructed, recognized, regulated and contested in various social and institutional contexts. Studying the victim therefore means analyzing not only the evolution of criminal justice, but also the broader transformations in the forms of belonging, legitimization and governance of harm in contemporary societies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author wishes to express her deepest gratitude to Professor Nicola Malizia, Full Professor of Criminology and Sociology of Deviance at the Department of Human and Social Sciences, Kore University of Enna. His intellectual guidance and invaluable mentorship over the last fourteen years have been fundamental to the author's academic development and to the conceptualisation of the research presented in this article.

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