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Organising team & speaker

**Frederique
Petit (MA)**

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On military, political and economic warfare

Philosopher Frederique Petit on perpetrator and victim identities

We are excited to introduce Frederique Petit, our Head Research Commission & Philosophy, at [the European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics in Amsterdam, 2025](#).

Frederique Petit (MA)

Frederique Petit is a philosopher with expertise in political science and (neuro) psychology. She has worked with the [St. Andrews Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence \(CSTPV\)](#) and was Programme and Communications Manager for [the Coalition for the International Criminal Court](#). Oscar, the founder of the Peace Conference, met her as a student at the [United Netherlands Program](#) to both [Harvard](#) and [Oxford University](#).

Why do perpetrator-victim dynamics matter?

“Perpetrator-victim dynamics are everywhere. Open a newspaper and you will find injustice done by those in power. I’d even say: authorities get away with dictating the powerless. Take for instance the World Bank and the IMF: they force countries to adopt and implement neoliberal policies, while it does not benefit their own people. Militarily, I remember as a child how I stayed up all night to watch the American bombing of Sarajevo. What intrigued me then, and still today, is how the once victims can be viewed as the next big perpetrators.”

How can victims become perpetrators themselves?

“Let me give an example. Back in the days, I had a schoolmate friend with big ears who was bullied. Later, he would bully another eccentric looking classmate joining later. I was flabbergasted with my friend and told him to stop bullying: ‘Remember how I had to help you a few years ago? How can you, out of all students, be bullying yourself?’ This micro-level example, we can also see back at a macro-scale. For example, in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Jews, who should know what it means to be excluded, who have for centuries been the victim of pogroms and the most gruesome deeds against humanity in the Second World War, are now destroying others? Such role switching thus happens in politics, companies, but even within friend groups. One may then ask the question: What’s the point? Why do we hurt each other? Why do we retribute? Why do we answer pain with pain –and get into a loop of hurting?”

Where does this “loop of mutually hurting each other” come from?

“As humans, we are shaped by both material and immaterial forces. They may strengthen each other. For example, biologically speaking, most of us have this innate fear of snakes. We do not need to have seen a snake as a child but still experience an involuntary and primitive anxiety reflex. This mechanism may also work with more complex concepts, like the time we spend on rearing children. I have seen parents drop off their children at the daycare and drive off within five minutes, as if it were a McDrive! Such intergenerational operant conditioning may thus form our action. These may be destructive. For example, we may want to avoid the underdog position by blaming, bullying and fighting others. It may also explain why we experience the one who corrects us in a discussion as ‘hurting us’. We then typically play along with the acts of war. We may keep quiet, not speak up against injustice, even though we privately and in one-on-one ‘safe’ settings are willing to admit that we disagree. Excuses for such hypocrisy can be: ‘But it was not up to me to say it’ or ‘I am not powerful and qualified enough to say it from my position’. Bystanders are often also scared to be stigmatised themselves. What fascinates me then is that, even though we may know what is best, we choose the dumbest option nonetheless. Psychoanalytically speaking, we fall back upon irrational, reflexive patterns. Such situations can quickly escalate. Instead of thinking ‘you irritate me when you sometimes do xy and z’, it becomes ‘you always do x’. Instead of shades of grey, we think in black and white. Our amygdala, our emotional centre in the brain, plays up. This makes it impossible to find each other. So, I’d say, we definitely need more of our thinking prefrontal cortex. So that we can disagree in calmness. It is like we have slept a good night and say the next morning: ‘Sorry, I shouldn’t have overreacted and told you off so harshly.’”

We are shaped by both material and immaterial forces. In conflict, we fall back on rather destructive irrational, and reflexive patterns. The amygdala, our emotional centre then plays up. We thus need prefrontal cortex reflection.

What makes it hard to keep our calm when we are in disagreement?

“There are two sides. On the side of the perpetrator, we are unwilling to see ourselves as ‘a perpetrator’. We want to have a positive self-image. In order to maintain this, we do not want to bring in any negativity. The disadvantage is that we will never get to the essence of a problem analysis and solution. After the Second World War, a year later on May 6, the Netherlands had never counted so many resistance fighters. Who really believes that, right? Since long I have been watching “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit”. It is mostly about acts of sexual transgressions. The focus lies on the victims. Where can you go? Should you press charges? What help fits the processing of trauma? While all this attention for the victims is needed, I think that we may need to pay more attention towards speaking up against the responsibility of the perpetrators and society at large. As a philosophical coach, I was doing a personal trajectory with a 16-year old girl, who liked to wear short skirts. Her parents warned her for problems. She resorted: ‘But why don’t you talk to the guys who give me problems instead?’ This speaking up against authority happens too little. Take for instance “Het Huis voor Klokkenluiders” (The House of Whistleblowers). It is there to protect whistleblowers, but are they really doing so? In reality, whistle-blowers get damaged, even when they have a fair point. In trying to bring this point up, Hannah Arendt is a great example. Have you seen the series “De Joodse Raad” (The Jewish Council)? Let’s be clear: we cannot imagine the extreme moral and existential dilemmas that they faced.. But some collaborated with the occupying Nazis, which lead to some Jews being transported earlier than others. Arendt made the point that ‘until Jews take responsibility for this fact, there is no real healing of the pain’. After she described this dynamic, she was being framed as a perpetrator herself. ‘She did not see it properly. She was an antisemite.’ All these claims were not true at all. Yet, she got an unprecedented hate wave over her. It is exactly this point that die *Rote Armee Fraction* in the 1960-80s made. From this perspective, the violent social media today does not show any new hate at all!”

We need to speak up against perpetrators, the authorities. The danger of doing that, though, is that you yourself become the object of hate, of that what you were trying to describe –and disagree with.

“On the side of the victim, I see a growing group of victims that do not want to identify with their victim identity. Instead, they see themselves as ‘a survivor’. This makes me a bit uncomfortable. It can even be as if they are happy that they have their survival story. Some sense of sincerity seems to disappear. In fact, it often looks more like a business model, as if they say ‘look at me’. Or take the ones who exaggeratedly claim a victim status, make outrageous claims towards how men sexually harass them, saying that they will give away the money to charity, yet eventually not donating any funds. Of course, they can be a victim indeed, however, I regularly see them exaggerate their victimhood by switching towards the violent side. Let me give another two examples. Take minority politicians who may have actually benefited from being the only one of colour in a white DJ world. They may indeed seek to change society to be more inclusive, which I applaud, yet, whenever it does not go their way, they get offended? It is at that point that I wonder about how we can bring it together with the other side. It also reminds me of the feminist movement that started in the 1960-70s. They were claiming how women were the victims of the patriarchal system. They organised many women groups, in which they would talk about woman issues. I heard, from talking with one of their founders, that children were welcome. However, from 11 years onwards, the boys were abruptly excluded. This made me wonder: ‘How do you want to solve this patriarchy issue when you do not want to include the other side –and not even bring your own son? What has your son done apart from being born as a man? What kind of perpetrator has he actually become? Do all men need to now disappear from planet earth?’ It is clear that they never thought about how to bridge the divide. Similarly, does a boss cross physical boundaries when they put their hands on your shoulder when looking along with your laptop? I’m not saying victims cannot have a fair point. However, are you wronged when the other says something that hurts your feelings? What if that pain comes more out of your own, earlier experiences with people who crossed your boundaries? Is the other a perpetrator when they disagree with the way that you see the world?”

Victims can become insincere when they exaggerate their victimhood. It can even lead towards the exclusion and the blocking of bridging the divides that they rightfully fight against.

So what types of perpetrators would you define?

“I like to differentiate between two types of perpetrators. On the one hand, we have those that are *aware*. For example, government officials who hold evil motives. They know that their decisions involve making victims. They do land grabbing, steal money, or are going to war to name but a few things they can do consciously and actively. On the other hand, there are also those that are *not aware* that their deeds and words do harm others. Who is an aware and unaware perpetrator? Groups can think very differently about this. For example, some see Trump as a doer, while others see him as an evil force and perpetrator. It has to do with our morality –what we define as ‘the good’. We all need to decide on what response we think matches the situation best. However, whatever problem you seek to solve, you will always create victims as people can always disagree or will be disadvantaged. For example, in Serbia, students, who had nothing to do with the war of their grandparents, still have a more difficult time obtaining a student visa to study abroad. Innocent victims, the children from perpetrator ancestors, are thus created. If you come from a family which has been ‘bad’, how can you be ‘good’ again? Does your rightful claim still hold –or do we disregard it? For me it is about if the other party is still seen. This determines for me if someone is an aware or unaware perpetrator. Of course, this distinction can be abused too. For example, when perpetrators claim it was not foreseen or intended, like Bernie Madoff with his Ponzi scheme. They then seek to get away without punishment by blaming others. They seek to claim the more neutral term of ‘doer’ (and not foreseeing any damage) instead of admitting they have been a ‘perpetrator’ all along. They want to avoid the negative qualification that goes along with the word and concept of ‘perpetrator’. People do not like to be associated with that. Yet, we can be an unaware perpetrator nonetheless, even against our own will.”

We typically seek the label of ‘doer’, anything to avoid the ‘negative’ label of ‘perpetrator’. Yet, despite our best intentions, we do still become perpetrators.

And why are you so charmed of Oscar's theoretical models?

“There are five reasons. First, it is the first systematic and systemic framework I have seen that connects different disciplines and levels of analysis. In research, in order to survive, we need to specialise. Yet, too much has led to a form of particularism. So we created separate models for criminals, pedosexuals, and terrorists. But I've always wondered: why should these models differ when they all deal with humans? Once I attended a research conference, and a presenter stated that there can be 200 paths towards radicalisation. It made me wonder why it could not be 300 instead? The charm of Oscar Westra van Holthe's perpetrator-victim models is that they focus on the common dynamics across different contexts. Whether you radicalise out of personal rejection or because you are in a group of radicalised youngsters, Oscar's framework unravels the underlying dynamics. He brings worlds together. Second, as a hands-on philosopher, I like to focus on the application of philosophy towards real life. Philosophers differentiate between the linear time with its actual events (Chronos) and the present of the moment wherein it makes sense to look back upon one's life (Kairos). Oscar's theoretical models allow for every person to find their own path towards Rome. It thus respects the Kairos moment. At the time that it is right for you, the part that speaks most to you, will light up. While insight in some perpetrator-victim dynamics takes time, you can decide for yourself what context (personal, professional or societal) you want to focus on. Third, Oscar keeps it human and real. He readily admits that he is also dealing with these dynamics in his own life. Fourth, you cannot *un-know* once you know. It is important that these levels of both micro/personal level and macro/societal level will be widespread. Fifth, I am noticing that the models help me live more in reality. While the saying is 'blessed are the ignorant', I would say, 'blessed are the ones who go look for answers themselves'. Like philosophy has its methods (like Socratic dialogues, Stoic preparation on the worst, Epicurus' value appreciation, and the power of writing), Oscar's theoretical models can help your search for wisdom as well.”

We need theoretical models that connect the different disciplines on extremism, criminology, and psychology. Oscar's models do that. They help live in reality –and unravel the underlying dynamics.

Want to learn more? Join us in person or online.

European Peace Conference on Perpetrator-Victim Dynamics

"We are not at war, but not at peace either," said the new NATO Chief, Mark Rutte. "If you want peace, prepare for war." Is Europe at a crossroad towards more polarization, identity politics, and war? Reflections on our human nature may help us find a sensible way forward.

At this year's peace conference, the first of its kind, an international group of scholars, experts and practitioners, will seek ways to explore how perpetrator-victim dynamics run through our lives, families, business and politics.

With guest lectures, workshops, personal and group reflections, we seek to embody the latest expertise from the research on war and peace.

JOIN THIS UNIQUE EXPERIENCE