

BLACK VICTIMHOOD VERSUS BLACK INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY

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Much of black history has been characterized by efforts to redress the injustice of racial subordination. However, since the mid-1950s, there has existed within the black community a concerted effort by individuals and groups to transform their victimization into a political advantage — to institutionalize it as a cultural symbol of moral and political status — by presenting themselves in terms of the self-as-victim image. They are by no means alone in this. Their campaign has been joined by a number of other groups that have captured categories of victimhood. Aaron Widavsky identifies some of the groups and their transformations to victimhood as follows:

American women have gone from being the freest women in the world to being victims of male chauvinism. The elderly have exchanged their reputation for wisdom for a designation of “disadvantaged.” Youth receives preferred treatment at Democratic party conventions. Entire regions seek official designation as “underprivileged,” as if it were a badge of honor. American blacks, Chicanos, Native Americans, and other ethnic minorities are now considered “Third World” peoples as if they lived in a regime controlled by foreigners.¹

This article will examine the nature of the self-as-victim image and its opposition to individual liberty and individual responsibility. Particular attention will be given to black victimhood. Since this is a critical examination of victimhood, it is necessary to stress at the outset that it is not an attempt either to deny the victimization of disadvantaged groups or to diminish it. My aim is to draw the lines

of distinction between *actual* victims and *symbolic* victims, and to illustrate how the beliefs and attitudes of the latter, which I refer to as *the stance of victimhood* or the *self-as-victim* image, are a threat to the values that are necessary for the relief of those who are disadvantaged.

THE NATURE OF VICTIMHOOD

A victim is a person who suffers from a destructive or injurious action or agency; he may be deceived or cheated, sacrificed or regarded as sacrificed. Some definitions note that one may be a victim of one's own emotions or ignorance. But we usually think of people as victims of another person's action or of some impersonal, external agency or force beyond one's control such as natural catastrophes, accidents, physical handicaps or illness, psychological or physical abuse, or political and social injustice.

Unlike actual victimization, the stance of victimhood is a technique of self-presentation and impression management that involves the symbolic elaboration of actual victim status. Since symbolic elaboration is a quality of conceptualization and not of concrete reality, one need not be an actual victim to make a claim to victim status. Whether he has actually experienced injustice or not, the symbolic victim presents himself as the embodiment all the real or imagined suffering of his membership group as a whole. He asks us to ignore the fact that he is not an actual victim and, instead, treat him *as if* he were a victim.

Victimhood or the self-as-victim requires that one speak in “the voice of the victim”.² It calls for a “posture of accusatory public testimony”³ that is intransigent and unceasing. As Judith Eaton points out, its approach to social problems:

carries with it certain attitudes that produce difficulty for any sense of shared vision, values, or beliefs: denial of personal responsibility, insistence on society's full responsibility for any personal problem one may have, a lack of commitment to resolution of the problems that created the [alleged] victimhood status, a need to continue to feel oppressed or have enemies, and a tendency to moral bullying.⁴

The subjective context of symbolic victimhood is the expectation of actual equality of resources, which involves the idealization of the principle of equality. Although symbolic victimhood is maintained by appealing to the ideals of justice and equality, it is distinguished not by a quest for justice, but by the quest for guilt. The quest for justice involves the expectation that injustice and the conflicts it provokes are *resolvable*; the quest for guilt assumes the *unresolvability* of injustice. For the stance taken by the symbolic victim, to paraphrase Lasch, is that the master sex, or master race, or master culture can never understand its victims, “though it

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

might perhaps begin to understand the extent of its own crimes".⁵ It is by arousing guilt that the symbolic victim is able to acquire power. This is the reason, observes historian C. Vann Woodward, that American public life has become "the seller's market for guilt".⁶ Indeed, it is for this reason, says Sennett, that "the moral status of the victim has never been greater or more dangerous than it is now".⁷

VICTIMHOOD'S CULTURAL CONTEXT

The self-as-victim has been cultivated and given viability in the context of the transformation of the American Dream. The American Dream originated during the American Enlightenment as the dream of man's perfectibility. However, by the 1950s the American Dream had been replaced by the dream of society's perfectibility, which was to be achieved by social engineering.⁸ The dream of society's perfectibility depended on welfare liberalism's belief that for every problem there is a solution and its confidence that the United States has both the material resources and the intelligence to eliminate social problems.⁹

But the dream and the confidence that drove it proved to be unrealistic. During the 1960s the failure to achieve societal perfectibility led to a "crisis of the American creed".¹⁰ Many groups blamed the failure not on the flawed assumptions of the ideal and attempts to transform them into practical reality, but on the institutions and national character of the country. It became respectable to take a highly critical view of America and its role in the world. The self-image of America as the vanguard of progress and democracy, and the embodiment of human aspirations for a better future was attacked with unprecedented vigor by Black nationalists, leaders of the New Left, countercultural gurus, self-awareness therapists, radical feminists, and ecologists.¹¹ C. Vann Woodward has called this attack on American culture and denial of its virtues a "quest for guilt".¹²

It was in this soil of the crisis of the American creed that the self-as-victim image took root, grew and came to fruition. The fertilizer was what Nathan Glazer describes as liberalism's "tendency to blame society and the political system for social problems; [its] self-induced guilt for not having earlier recognized and acted on injustices, inequalities, and deprivations; and [its] sense of complacent moral superiority to forbears who did not recognize these problems or act on them at all."¹³ The self-as-victim image now thrives in a cultural environment in which "no one is considered a winner in American history," writes Aaron Wildavsky. "Nor are there any self-declared winners today. On all sides there is gloom; each side claims it is losing."¹⁴

In this atmosphere, "Anything and everything may serve as the rallying point for a new pressure group today, provided it is someone's *weakness*," writes Ayn Rand. "Weakness of any sort — intellectual, moral, financial or numerical — is today's standard of value, criterion of rights and claim to privileges."¹⁵

THE QUEST FOR EQUALITY

Welfare liberalism's role in the maintenance of symbolic victimhood is anchored in the demand for equality and its accompanying revolution of rising expectations. Since that equality is never realized, claims of victimhood have escalated as the demand for equality has increased. During the 1960s and 1970s, improvements in certain programs were frustrated by the rising expectations that were themselves reinforced by the proposals of new policies which promised more than could be delivered. When the promises were inadequately realized, the higher level of expectation which they engendered were met by new policies which also failed to realize their promises in the face of higher expectations.

There is no way to eliminate the discrepancy between expectations and actual improvements in life chances. No amount of success would be sufficient to end the demand for more. For, as Nathan Glazer notes, "rising expectations continually enlarge the sea of felt and perceived misery, whatever happens to it in actuality."¹⁶ And since there is no point at which misery is finally eliminated, and no point at which the demand for equality comes to an end, people become ever more sensitive to smaller and smaller degrees

of inequality. In order to claim more, individuals and groups at all class levels seize on inequalities as evidence of mistreatment.¹⁷

THE LEGITIMATION OF VICTIMHOOD

As with all statuses, the claim to victim status must be honored by others in order to have any meaningful impact on social relations, especially power relations. One of the most significant endorsements came from President Johnson in his commencement address at Howard University in 1965:

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, "You are free to compete with all the others" and still justly believe that you have been completely fair. Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates. ... We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal equality but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result.

Johnson's advocacy of equality of result legitimated the assumption that historic injustice justifies special treatment even when that treatment is itself just another form of injustice. By the end of the sixties it was clear to all that in the welfare state one could get more attention — and power — by being a victim than he could being a nonvictim.

Once conferred, victim status is a very durable and highly valuable possession. It not only confers power, but also protects the individual from being discredited, doubted, contradicted, devalued, mistreated, or embarrassed. It enables people to elicit compensation without taking responsibility for their actions. As Wildavsky notes, the triumph of egalitarianism, which fuels victim politics, is that government subsidizes victim categories, and pays people to fit into them.¹⁸ All the symbolic victim needs to do is claim that something or someone is responsible for his unfortunate situation and that he is powerless (through no fault of his own) to reverse his misfortune. Then, in the name of justice and with the force of law, sympathizers rush to relieve him and punish his alleged victimizers.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL PROBLEMS THEORY

Symbolic victimhood has also received legitimation from social scientific studies of social problems that find fault with the social system in behalf of the powerless. Their definitions of social problems as the consequence of unethical, illegal and destructive actions of power individuals, groups and institutions in American society give credence to the point of view of the subordinate group in some hierarchical relationship.¹⁹ Out of social problems research have emerged enduring symbolic representations that make a long list of pathologies and deficiencies associated with victimhood.

One such representation is the pathological image of the black family: that it was destroyed or undermined by slavery; that its deterioration explains the disorganized and pathological characteristics of the modern black family. Despite falsifications of these hypotheses, the black family continues to be seen in negative terms.²⁰ Another source of victimhood reinforcement is the symbolic definition of blacks as historically objects of discrimination whose self-esteem therefore requires the assurance of equal treatment in many types of situations, preferential treatment in others, and societal support for self-concepts that emphasize affirmation rather than negation of blackness.²¹

Increasingly the pathology and deficit models have been challenged; however, not because these models misrepresent the circumstances and value orientations of millions of blacks, but in order to substitute the deficit hypothesis with the view that what are taken for deficits are actually cultural differences. Stanley Eitzen's statement on the subject is a typical rejection of the deficit hypothesis, known also as the "blaming-the-victim" or cultural deprivation approach to social problems.

Cultural deprivation is a loaded ethnocentric term applied by members of the majority to the culture of the minority group. It implies that the culture of the group in question is not only inferior but also deficient. The concept itself is patently false, because no culture can be inferior to another, it can only be different.²²

Cultural relativists who take this position argue that difference means deficit only if it is weighed against the standards of the dominant society. In their view, when an attribute that is viewed as cultural deprivation (nonstandard English, for example) is seen in terms of the context in which the individual is socialized and spends his or her time, it may in fact be an asset that is as adequate as what is found in the dominant culture, or even superior to it.²³ In other words, difference is no longer considered to be deficiency.

Arguments that equate difference with deficiency are certainly fallacious, but it is equally fallacious to equate difference with adequacy. Depending on the context, an attribute may be different because it is deficient, or because it is adequate. However, the difference-is-not-deficiency argument does not recognize a universal standard by which the deficiency and adequacy can be distinguished. Rather, it asserts that deficiencies should be accorded the same merit as that granted to the prevailing standards of adequacy. This approach effectively not only evades the criteria that distinguish deficiency from adequacy; it establishes deficiency itself the standard of value. The consequence is a double standard by which the morally praiseworthy is defined not in terms of a person's ability but in terms of his handicaps; not in terms of his achievements but in terms of his suffering; not in terms of his own individual capacity to surmount problems like racial discrimination but in terms of the collective oppression suffered by his ancestors.

THE CASE OF BLACK VICTIMHOOD

As the civil rights movement of the 1960s shifted its strategy from principled protest to pragmatic politics, which involved the acquisition of material gains such as housing, welfare, and health care, black leaders imputed the disadvantaged circumstances of the black underclass and lower-income groups to the entire black community. The effect was to disguise the achievements of individual blacks and the advancement and expansion of the black middle class that had been underway long before Rosa Parks refused to go the back of the bus. But the claim to victim status has been a significant characteristic of each stage of black activism. It legitimated the integration movement's politics of redemption as articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr. It was also present in the black power movement's politics of retribution and the black identification movement's politics of exclusion and racial solidarity. Today, it finds expression in the politics of sensitivity, compensation and remediation.

The stance of black victimhood entails an assessment of the changes in the problems and status of Blacks as compared with each other and with more advantaged groups. The perspective I call the *deprivation orientation* is consistent with the stance of black victimhood.²⁴ It dismisses the changes in race relations and the socioeconomic mobility of blacks as "the illusion of inclusion."²⁵ Black gains are seen as only symbolic in relation to white Americans; blacks are urged not be dissuaded by arguments that they are making progress.²⁶ Such pessimistic assessments of black progress are most often offered by people whose own lives and careers are falsifications of those assessments. One of the ironies of black victimhood is its appeal to people who have already made significant progress toward assimilation. Such upwardly mobile ethnics, says John Higham, are already strongly enough positioned to imagine that permanent minority status might be advantageous.²⁷

Black journalist William Rasberry has been one of the few observers of the black community to criticize the laments of black deprivation proponents. "It has become the new orthodoxy for black Americans — particularly those doing pretty well — to deny that anything has changed for the better," writes Rasberry.²⁸ He views such denials as being motivated by the fear that an admission of progress "will take white America off the hook, reduce

guilt, and preclude further advances." There is also the persistent feeling that the fragile prosperity of middle class blacks might blow away with ill economic winds, as well as their uncertainty of their status either in the white community or the black community.

Despite the risks of upward mobility and anxieties over status, Rasberry concludes that

... it's time for blacks of accomplishment and influence to stop poor-mouthing in the name of black solidarity. It's silly, and worse, for black men and women, wearing designer suits, living in elegant homes, working at important and prestigious and lucrative careers to pretend that we are hardly better off than a sharecropper in the rural south. The sharecropper knows better, and so do we.²⁹

Rasberry is not alone in these sentiments. Many other blacks feel the same way. During his tenure as chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas told an audience with much indignation:

I'm tired of blacks being thought of only as poor people, people on welfare, people who are unemployed. That's the only way the Jesse Jacksons and the other black leaders talk about black people. To them we're all a monolith. Well, they are not talking for the 80 or 90 percent of black people in this country who have never been on welfare or in jail.³⁰

As I have indicated, it is no accident that this trend emerged as the rights of black individuals were legally recognized, and at a time when blacks were benefiting from increased social mobility and an expansion of socioeconomic opportunities. Since the indices of black progress plainly show the disparity in the advances of middle-class and lower-class blacks, what purpose does it serve to emphasize the plight of the lower class as the *sine qua non* of the problems and status of the entire black community when it is evident to everyone that this is not the case? What function does the denial of black improvement have for its proponents?

As the upward mobility of middle-class blacks increases in the socio-economic realm, they lose claim to what John M. Cuddihy calls "the charisma of a continuing victim status" in the cultural realm. The *fact* of their progress, however measured, threatens to dispossess them of the psychic and material benefits of victim status.³¹

Clearly, the denial of progress disguises black success, and enables proponents of victimhood to justify their claim to the privileges of official victim status. It also enables middle-class service deliverers, spokesmen, and patrons to use the suffering of the unfortunate as a pretext for their own drive for power. For, as the quest for privileges and security under welfare-state capitalism has increasingly depended on the organized power, it has become more advantageous to present oneself as a *permanent* member of the deprived.

ABUSES OF SUFFERING

Of all of the consequences of the campaign of victimhood, the most significant is its threat to the legitimacy of the very ideas that identify the nation. During the 1960s moderate civil rights activists took the view articulated by Gunnar Myrdal that all that was needed to improve the lot of blacks was for white Americans to change their minds, to put into practice the ideals they believed in. However, as the spoils of victimhood have mounted, the view has emerged that the ideals themselves must be changed.³² Principles such as the primacy of individual rights, equality before the law, private enterprise, and free market capitalism are, according to writers like Derrick Bell, but abstractions that "lead to legal results that harm blacks and perpetuate their inferior status". Whites who defend such ideas are of course racists, whether they know it or not. Blacks who do so are like "those slaves willing to mimic the masters' views, carry out orders, and by their presence provide a perverse legitimacy to the oppression they aided and approved."³³

Other negative consequences of black victimhood stem from what Richard Sennett identifies as abuses brought about by the ennobling of suffering.

Sympathy is extended to the victim for his condition, not as a person; thus, if he improves his material circumstances or is mobile upwardly socially, then he loses his moral claims and is considered 'a traitor to his class.'³⁴

Several writers have focused on this consequence of the idea of the ennobled victim in different contexts. Peter Berger sees it as a theme in the anti-liberal and "de-modernizing impulse" that emphasizes concrete "group rights" rather than individual rights. When group rights are given primacy over individual rights, says Berger, "individual success and aspiration are increasingly condemned as a betrayal of the collective effort."³⁵

In a different but related context, economist George Reisman reaches the same conclusion in his analysis of how the doctrine of altruism, as well as "the repressive conditions imposed on blacks by the mixed economy," have stifled the progress of blacks. The doctrine of altruism, which requires a person to place others above himself and regards self-sacrifice as the highest virtue, writes Reisman,

... takes the view that those who struggle heroically and do succeed, are not to be given any moral credit; on the contrary, they are often denounced as 'Uncle Toms,' who have accepted self-interest as their goal rather than self-sacrifice for the needy. This is hardly the sort of philosophy that would inspire the effort and struggle required to get out the slums.³⁶

Another abuse of the idea of the ennobled sufferer, says Sennett, is the notion that "no person is morally legitimate unless he or she is suffering."³⁷ The sources of legitimacy through suffering are ultimately to be found in an injury inflicted by someone else or by "the environment."³⁸ This leads to the devaluation of achievement, and, as mentioned earlier, the tendency of "champions" of the oppressed to use the suffering of the unfortunate as a pretext for their own drives for power. Sennett points out that the sin of viewing suffering as the condition of moral legitimacy is also committed by people who take "the oppressed as 'models,' as people who are 'really' dealing with life, people more solid and substantial than oneself. It is psychological cannibalism."³⁹

Most of all, argues Sennett, the ennobling of victims means that

in ordinary middle-class life we are forced constantly to go in search of some injury, some affliction, in order to justify even the contemplation of questions of justice, right, and entitlement in our lives.⁴⁰

Nothing could be more devastating to the nation that is the refuge for the victimized of the world than to permit itself to become not the haven of those yearning to breathe free, but the therapeutic sink hole of those yearning to be relieved of the risks and responsibility of liberty.

NOTES

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2. Christopher Lasch, "The Feminist Subject", *Salmaquindi*, Spring-Summer 1986, pp. 27-32.
3. Warner Berthoff, quoted in Lasch, p. 30.
4. Judith Eaton, *The Unfinished Agenda: Higher Education and the 1980s*, American Council on Education/Macmillan, New York, 1991, pp. 48-49.
5. Lasch, *op. cit.*
6. C. Vann Woodward, "The Fall of the American Adam", *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 35, November 1981, 24-34. Quoted in Aaron Wildavsky, *op. cit.*, p. 110. See also C. Vann Woodward, "The Fall of the American Adam", *The Future of the Past*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1989.
7. Richard Sennett, *Authority*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1980, p. 149.
8. This conception of the transformation of the American Dream is from William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1956, p. 14.
9. Nathan Glazer, *The Limits of Social Policy*, Harvard University Press, 1989.
10. Peter L. Berger, *The Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change*, Anchor, Garden City, New York, 1976, pp. 220-223.
11. *Ibid.*
12. C. Vann Woodward, "The Fall of the American Adam", *The Future of the Past*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1989, p. 124.
13. Glazer, *op. cit.*
14. Wildavsky, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
15. Ayn Rand, "The Age of Envy", in *The New Left: The Anti-Industrial Revolution*, 2nd ed., New American Library, New York, 1971.
16. Glazer, *op. cit.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. Wildavsky, *op. cit.*
19. D. Stanley Eitzen with Maxine Baca Zinn, *Social Problems*, 4th ed., Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989, p. 11.
20. The black-family pathology thesis was expounded in Daniel P. Moynihan, Paul Barton and Ellen Broderick, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, Office of Policy Planning and Research, U.S. Department of Labor, Washington DC, 1965. It was not until 1976 when Herbert Gutman published his research on the black family, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom 1750-1925*, that this view of the black family was refuted. Other studies, such as John H. Scanzoni, *The Black Family in Modern Society*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1971, have shown that there is no strong causal link between the disadvantages of blacks and their family structure; that the primary family differences are class-linked rather than race-linked.
21. Michael Cole and Jerome S. Bruner, "Cultural Differences and Inferences about Psychological Processes", *The American Psychologist*, 26, October 1971, 867-76. Cited in Howard H. Bahr, Bruce A. Chadwick, Joseph H. Strauss, *American Ethnicity*, D. C. Heath, Lexington, Massachusetts, 1979, p. 330.
22. D. Stanley Eitzen with Maxine Baca Zinn, *op. cit.*
23. Bahr, et al, *op. cit.*, p. 331.
24. For an examination of three variants of the deprivation orientation's historical perspective of black exploitation, see James A. Geschwender, *Racial Stratification in America*, William C. Brown, Dubuque, Iowa, 1978. Geschwender identifies three models of black exploitation: (1) the internal colony model; (2) the economic class model; and (3) the nation-class model. A great deal of the rhetoric of victimhood rests on views represented by these models.
25. James A. Hefner, "The Illusion of Inclusion", in Maraurite Ross Barnett and James A. Hefner eds., *Public Policy for the Black Community: Strategies and Perspectives*, Alfred Publishing Co., New York, 1976.
26. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, Vintage Press, New York, 1969, p. 37.
27. John Higham, *Send These to Me*, Atheneum, New York, 1975, p. 211.
28. William Raspberry, "Denying Black Gains is Wrong", *Los Angeles Times*, April 19, 1979, part 2, p. 15. Quoted in Peter Clecak, *America's Quest for the Ideal Self: Dissent and Fulfillment in the 60s and 70s*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1983, p. 180.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Thomas in Alan C. Brownfeld, "Black Conservatives Emerge as a Major Force", *Human Events*, 3, January 1981, p.5.
31. John Murray Cuddihy, *The Ordeal of Civility*, Dell Publishing Co., New York, 1974, p. 122.
32. Jennifer L. Hochschild, *The New American Dilemma: Liberal Democracy and School Desegregation*, Yale University Press, 1984.
33. Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, Basic Books, New York, 1992.
34. Sennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-150. It is a terrible irony that Richard Sennett, who understands so well the abuses of suffering, would foster the idea in *The Injuries of Class* (1973) that capitalism's ethos of achievement injures human dignity and that the "class structure in America is organized so that the tools of freedom become sources of indignity". (p.30)
35. Peter L. Berger, Brigitte Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness*, Vintage, New York, 1974, pp. 198-199.
36. George Reisman, "Capitalism: The Cure for Racism", *The Intellectual Activist*, Vol. 2, No. 20, September 8, 1982.
37. Sennett, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
38. *Ibid.*
39. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
40. *Ibid.*