

Alyson M. Cole

The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror

Stanford University Press, 2006, 240 pp.

\$US 50.00 cloth (0804754608), \$US 19.95 paper (0804754616)

Since the 1990s, academics, journalists, and public intellectuals have debated the prominent role of “victim claims” in U.S. society. According to a growing number of voices, the inflation of these claims is a pathological trend that prevents citizens and policy-makers alike from sorting out genuine from false victimization. In *The Cult of True Victimhood*, political theorist Alyson M. Cole explores what she depicts as a coherent ideological and political campaign against victims, which is related to the contemporary backlash against affirmative action, multiculturalism, and the welfare state. According to Cole, the “anti-victim discourse shapes victim talk by foregrounding and perpetuating particular and rather new understandings of victims, victimization, and victimhood. It is this campaign that associates victimization with weakness, passivity, dependency, and effeminacy. Conversely, it also depicts victims as manipulative, aggressive, and even criminal, at times, as actual or potential victimizers, a danger to themselves and society” (p. 3). Because this anti-victim discourse has become ever present in U.S. society, Cole argues, many progressives have attempted to disengage from so-called “victim politics.” As a result, the idea of “victim” is increasingly becoming taboo in U.S. society, which helps explain the growing popularity of terms like “hero” and “survivor.”

Attacking groups that depict themselves as victims of the existing social order, anti-victimists compare this army of supposedly inauthentic victims to the limited number of helpless and innocent “true victims.” Not surprisingly, these “true victims” frequently include unborn fetuses and “those individuals who have been ostracized, censored, and punished in other ways by political correctness, affirmative action, hate speech codes, and similar manifestations of injurious victim politics” (p. 6). This politically-motivated and conservative narrowing of the concept of “victim” is what Cole calls “the cult of true victimhood.”

One key aspect of the contemporary U.S. anti-victimist discourse is that it is grounded in a purely individualistic and moralistic vision of social order. From this perspective, anti-victimism is an attempt to reduce most group-based political demands to individualized pathologies stemming from *personal* moral and psychological flaws. For Cole, this inversion of the feminist motto “the personal is political” (i.e., “the political is personal”) is a serious challenge to genuine progressive politics, which rejects pure individualism in order to foster collective action aimed at fighting structural inequalities. From this perspective, anti-victimism is not only an attack against identity politics and the welfare state but an attempt to annihilate progressive politics altogether. Although Cole does not explicitly refer to C. Wright Mills’s concept of “sociological imagination,” one could depict anti-victimism as an attack against any type of sociological perspective, as many anti-victimists seem to share Margaret Thatcher’s idea that “there is no such thing as society.” This is perhaps why, when assessing victimization claims, anti-victimists appraise the character of the alleged victims instead of looking at the broad social and economic factors that may legitimize such claims (p. 35). Promoting personal responsibility, anti-victimists criticize most alleged victims for blaming others for their personal flaws rather than “assuming full responsibility for their individual lives.” This is exactly the discourse that helps U.S. conservatives discredit affirmative action and the welfare state, for example (p. 45).

While examining the roots and implications of the contemporary U.S. anti-victimist discourse, Cole discusses the feminist debates about the status of women as victims, the surprising fate of the term “blaming the victim” coined by sociologist William Ryan and, finally, the evolving meaning of victimhood surrounding the events of September 11, 2001, and the so-called “war on terror.” According to the author, President Bush’s insistence to depict the United States as a purely innocent victim of terrorism reinforces the prominence of the cult of true victimhood in contemporary U.S. society. Yet, post-September 11 discourse on terrorism and victimhood is ambiguous. For example, U.S. citizens killed during the attacks of September 11 are frequently portrayed as “heroes” rather than “victims” (p. 162). More important, the “war on terror” is grounded in the explicit rejection of the idea that the United States is a passive victim of terrorism. This reality and the idea that the United States can reshape the world in the name of freedom are grounded in an individualistic and voluntaristic vision of manhood the Bush administration has promoted since the events of September 11. Overall, “Bush incessantly recombines different elements of anti-victimism and the Cult of True Victimhood it spawned” (p. 167).

This review cannot summarize fully the interesting and multifaceted material Cole brings together in order to reconstruct and analyze the U.S. discourse on victimhood and anti-victimism. On the whole, *The Cult of True Victimhood* is a well written and stimulating book that social scientists interested in issues ranging from criminology to feminism and ethnic relations could find interesting. Moreover, this solid piece of scholarship offers an original take on contemporary U.S. society that has no equivalent in the existing social science literature. Finally, because the book is well written, it could be used effectively in graduate and advanced undergraduate courses in both sociology and political science.

This excellent book is not without limitations, however. First, the exceedingly long chapter devoted to the conversion to Judaism of black professor Julius Lester does not add much to the book. It may have been better to publish this chapter separately as a journal article. At the very least, major cuts could have been enacted to a chapter that sometimes feels anecdotal. Second, although Cole does offer an interesting discussion about the history of the discourse about victims and victimization in the United States, her claim that modern anti-victimism only emerged in the early 1990s is open to debate. When one looks at popular culture, for example, it is possible to find traces of anti-victimism in the post-war era. A classic example is the famous song “Gee, officer Krupke” from Leonard Bernstein’s and Stephen Sondheim’s 1957 musical *West Side Story* <<http://www.westsidestory.com/site/level2/lyrics/krupke.html>>(The song from the 1961 movie is available online:<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pq28qCkIEHc>>):

“**ACTION** (*Sings*)

My father is a bastard,

My ma's an S.O.B.

My grandpa's always plastered,

My grandma pushes tea.

My sister wears a mustache,

My brother wears a dress.

Goodness gracious, that's why I'm a mess!

A-RAB: (*As Psychiatrist*) Yes!

Officer Krupke, you're really a slob.

This boy don't need a doctor, just a good honest job.

Society's played him a terrible trick,

And sociologic'ly he's sick!

ACTION

I am sick!

ALL

We are sick, we are sick,

We are sick, sick, sick,

Like we're sociologically sick!

A-RAB: In my opinion, this child don't need to have his head shrunk at all.

Juvenile delinquency is purely a social disease!

ACTION: Hey, I got a social disease!

A-RAB: So take him to a social worker!

ACTION

Dear kindly social worker,

They say go earn a buck.

Like be a soda jerker,

Which means like be a schumck.

It's not I'm anti-social,

I'm only anti-work.

Gloryosky! That's why I'm a jerk!

BABY JOHN: (*As Female Social Worker*)

Eek!

Officer Krupke, you've done it again.

This boy don't need a job, he needs a year in the pen.

It ain't just a question of misunderstood;

Deep down inside him, he's no good!"

Although this song is a parody, it points to a debate about the sociological explanations of crime and the status of victimhood that became quite prominent in post-war U.S. society. More research on this topic could improve our understanding of the genealogy of anti-victimism in the United States.

These brief critical remarks should not discourage social scientists from reading this provocative book, which could stimulate further research about victimhood and anti-victimism, both in the United States and in Canada. For example, as far as the United States is concerned, it would be interesting to take a closer look at the debate surrounding the enactment of the 1996 federal welfare reform. Although Cole refers to this reform in her book, specialists of social policy could draw on her analysis of anti-victimhood to explore the ideological factors leading to the enactment of the 1996 reform. This type of analysis could complement the work of scholars like Fred Block and Margaret Somers (2005), who recently published a long article about the conservative discourse on "perversity" (i.e. the unintended consequences of social programs) that, according to them, paved the ground for this conservative and punitive reform.

Regarding Canada, it would be interesting to explore the possible spreading of anti-victimist ideas in that country. For example, the recent decision of the Harper government to abolish the Court Challenges Program seems grounded in the idea that there are too many "victim claims" in Canadian society, and that the federal state should not facilitate this trend by helping groups seen as vulnerable to defend their rights. Moreover, although the anti-victimist discourse is certainly less prevalent in Canada than in the United States, it would be interesting to compare its development in both countries. Cole's important book is the best possible starting point for scholars interested in taking a comparative perspective on the politics of victimhood and anti-victimism.

References

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<http://www.cjsonline.ca/reviews/victimhood.html>

November 2007

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