1 Situating Anti-Victim Discourse

"VICTIM" HAS BECOME A KEYWORD in the American political lexicon and ubiquitous in the culture at large. Since the end of the 1980s, the victim idiom has been pivotal to fierce disputes over the welfare state, civil and criminal justice reform, as well as the so-called culture wars. Difficult questions concerning what harms and injuries merit recognition, what such recognition entails and, as importantly, the power and risks of fashioning political identities around suffering fuel these diverse controversies. I contend that the recasting of familiar conflicts in terms of victimization—by employing concepts such as "victim" and the recently devised "victimist" and "victimism"—is politically significant and requires thorough scrutiny. We cannot fully understand how the welfare state was dismantled, why the culture wars periodically erupt, or even what prompted George W. Bush's response to the events of September 11, 2001, without excavating the meanings victimhood and victimization have assumed in contemporary U.S. politics.

On the surface, American society appears ever more responsive to suffering. We have established a multitude of new agencies, crafted new laws, and allocated more public funding to ameliorate suffering of all kinds, from domestic violence and hate crimes to natural disasters and ethnic cleansings. Even the decorum governing how to talk to those who endured great harm about their injuries has been refined in recent decades. The prohibition against holding individuals—for instance, victims of crime—responsible for their plight now seems so thoroughly entrenched that we often forget that the expression "blaming the victim" was coined only thirty years ago. Popular culture and the media provide additional evidence of a vigorous public appetite for narratives of

harrowing experiences. Confessions about torment and devastation may be prospective routes to celebrity status. The commemoration and museumification of genocides, slavery, and other atrocities increasingly occupy the national public sphere. Have we become, as Charles Sykes cautions, a "nation of victims"?[1]

This book endeavors to dispel this misperception. Victim talk is indeed omnipresent, but American political discourse is dominated not by claims of victimization as much as by claims against victims. Along with new institutional and cultural attentiveness to particular forms of harm, I argue, victimhood has been vilified. In an outpouring of books, articles, and political speeches, a common warning rings: "victimism" infects every corner of our social body, endangering our national well-being. Thus, the columnist John Taylor asserts:

> It's a strange phenomenon, this growing compulsion of Americans of all creeds, colors, and incomes, of the young and the old, the infirm and the robust, the guilty as well as the innocent, to ascribe to themselves the status of victims, to try to find someone or something else to blame for whatever is wrong or incomplete or just plain unpleasant about their lives.[2]

In articulating their concern politicians, scholars, and journalists alike turn "victim" into a term of derision, an epithet. In contrast to most previous uses, they deploy "victim" to dismiss, ridicule, and condemn. Pundit Larry Elder's sneer is typical: "Get it? The joys of victimhood. . . . [V]icticrats feel a sense of moral superiority. . . . This creates a sense of power, of entitlement, of a club to be used against 'oppressors.' The comfort of underdog status."[3]

The best evidence of the success of the crusade to shame victims may be that now even those whose victim status would be readily acknowledged under the most stringent criteria perform linguistic gymnastics to disavow the designation. Consider, for example, the case of Nicole Barrett. A deranged stranger smashed in her skull with a six-pound paving stone in the middle of the day in midtown Manhattan. Barrett's head presently bears four major scars, a crater-like dent, as well as two metal plates held in place by screws; and she suffers from severe short- and long-term memory loss, depression, and frequent "sensory jumbles." Nonetheless, she proudly tells the *New York Times* that she is "not a victim" because she "does not want to dwell on the past."[4]

While it is rare to find many self-designated victims these days, there are legions of "survivors." The brutalized Central Park jogger, Trisha Meili, waited fifteen years to come forth to narrate her tale of survivorship, which she describes as a "story of hope and possibility."[5] Professional victim advocates

encourage this trend of renouncing victimhood. A study published in the *National Law Journal* found that social workers recommend renaming victims' services—battered women's shelters, for instance—survivors' agencies. This new classification, proponents explain, is "less passive, negative, and disempowering."[6] That victims and their supporters purge the term from their vocabulary is more than a matter of arbitrary word choice.

This book explores the contours and content of the campaign against victims—its ideological underpinnings, its historical genealogies, the cultural sensibilities it promotes, and the political alliances and policies it sustains. Much has been written about "the victim problem" in American politics. In contrast, I make this literature itself into the subject of my investigation. As I argue, 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. The sheriff of Milwaukee County, Wisconsin, David Clarke, succinctly articulates this view: "They adopt victimhood as an identity and exaggerate it. They give failure, lack of effort, and even criminality a tacit stamp of approval. This is done not with a view towards forging solutions but to foster and nurture an unfocused brand of resentment and sense of alienation from the mainstream."[7]

"Victim" serves as such a sharp insult today because anti-victimists transformed discussions of social obligations, compensations, and remedial or restorative procedures into criticisms of the alleged propensity of self-anointed victims to engage in objectionable conduct. Though forged during debates over domestic policies, in the wake of 9/11 President Bush applied this conception of victimhood to characterize terrorism.

> Defeating the militant network is difficult, because it thrives, like a parasite, on the suffering and frustration of others. The radicals exploit local conflicts to build a culture of victimization, in which someone else is always to blame and violence is always the solution. They exploit resentful and disillusioned young men and women, recruiting them through radical mosques as the pawns of terror.[8]

The phenomenon that I term "anti-victimism" appears at first to be little more than a reaction to the perceived excess of victim claims, or perhaps yet

another skirmish between the political Left and Right. Such a view is woefully facile. Whereas anti-victimists persistently target racial politics, feminism, and other forms of oppositional politics, the anti-victim sentiment is not unique to conservatives. Presumed victim-defenders betray a similar aversion to victimhood. The trend within many progressive movements has been to strip adherents of any latent attachments to suffering, to prevent them from being so "victim-oriented." The Democratic Leadership Council, for instance, devoted an entire issue of *The New Democrat* to the theme of "Getting Beyond Victimization." Contributor Errol Smith sums up the thrust of the essays addressing the pervasiveness of "victim mentality" among African Americans, Latinos, women, gays and lesbians, and even inner-city mayors: "If we do nothing else in the next decade except reject this victim identity . . . the nation will have taken a quantum leap forward. The more detached we are from 'victim' mentality, the more responsible for ourselves, the less likely we will become victims."[9]

It is one of the ironies of American politics today that as the Left desperately struggles to disengage from "victim politics," the Right jockeys to carve out a place within it. While conservative critics deem victimism to be a pervasive threat and call to restrain victims, they nevertheless become in effect practitioners of victim politics by devising and promoting new groups of victims. Perhaps the most striking example is the victims' rights movement. Paradoxically, many of the same individuals who bemoan the proliferation and empowerment of victims enthusiastically support this effort to substantially alter the criminal justice system by granting victims of crime robust new rights and corresponding roles in criminal proceedings. This movement recently succeeded in codifying fetuses' status as victims into law by amending legislation designed to reduce violence against women to include the Unborn Victims of Violence Act of 2004 (the so-called Laci and Connor Peterson amendment). Consequently, offenders can be charged with two crimes for injuring a pregnant woman. My argument, in brief, is that anti-victim discourse subsumes the ostensible opposition between victim-claimers and victim-blamers.

One way to reconcile these seemingly incongruous positions—how those who demonize victimhood come to engage in victim politics themselves— might be to follow Michael Rogin's theorization of political demonology. The current drive against victimism continues a long tradition of suppressing groups that challenge the status quo by casting them as a subversive threat to the stability of the nation. Rogin contends that the battle to repress subversives has often assumed the form of identification, desire, and impersonation.

Taken inside, the subversive would obliterate the American; driven outside, the subversive becomes an alien who serves as repository for the disowned, negative American self. The alien preserves American identity against fears of boundary collapse and thereby allows the countersubversive, now split from the subversive, to mirror his foe. Countersubversive politics . . . imitates the subversion it attacks.[10]

With one hand, anti-victimists strive to knock victims off their holy mantle. They forge victimhood (or victimism) as a subject position and then target it for ridicule. With the other hand, however, they place victims on an even higher pedestal by advancing what I call the Cult of True Victimhood (in tribute to the famous depiction of the nineteenth-century gender ideology, "the cult of true womanhood").[11] In this way, anti-victim discourse goes beyond the ambiguity of countersubversive splitting and mirroring, for its practitioners reify and exalt the very status they revile.

True Victimhood is defined in opposition to victimism: a victim is "true" because the victimist is evidently a bogus victim. However, contrasting victims and victimists has less to do with the veracity of petitions or the facts of injury than with the sufferer's personal qualities, which may be classified according to the following categories: propriety, responsibility, individuality, and innocence. *Propriety:* The True Victim is a noble victim. He endures his suffering with dignity, refraining from complaining or other public displays of weakness. *Responsibility:* The True Victim commands his fate; he does not exploit his injury to excuse his failures. He assumes victimhood reluctantly or, even better, rejects the status altogether. *Individuality:* Victimhood is an individual status even when a group is injured collectively. A True Victim is not a victim by affiliation or by engaging in "victim politics"; victimization must be immediate and concrete. *Innocence:* This is the most important virtue of True Victimhood. Anti-victimists apply the category of innocence in two distinct ways. First, with respect to his victimization, the victim's innocence must be complete and incontrovertible. True victims have not contributed to their injury in any way. Second, the victim is morally upright; he must be pure. This totalizing conception of innocence encompasses every facet of the True Victim's character.

The Cult of True Victimhood's construction of innocence serves to limit victim claims. Accordingly, philosopher James Bayley argues that the designation "victim" should be reserved for individuals who vigorously resisted their injury and were entirely powerless to prevent it. The possibility of having acted other-

wise disqualifies sufferers from victim status: "Victims are helpless; if they are not helpless they are not victims. . . . It is false to the meaning of victimhood to take the entire array of ills visited upon African Americans by bigoted people [for instance] as victimization." Bayley further specifies that the term "victimization" accurately applies only to instances of suffering resulting from actions prohibited by law and brought about by an "identifiable cause." [12]

As in Bayley's formulation, anti-victimism superimposes a highly rigid juridical model of victimhood on all types of victimization. In doing so, it stifles the majority of victim claims, radically narrows the scope of those who might rightfully seek victim status, and confines redress to retributive actions by the state. When charges of social injustice are recast within notions of blamelessness and guilt that emanate from the courtroom, members of marginal groups must provide the equivalent of forensic evidence to demonstrate that they are in fact disadvantaged.

At times, True Victimhood invests suffering with an added, if not transcendent, meaning amounting to an anti-victimist martyrology. Foremost in the pantheon of true victims are 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. Their anguish is especially poignant because it exposes the sinister forces in American society that hide behind the liberal mask of tolerance, inclusion, and equality.

That anti-victimists cast victimism as a form of victimization exemplifies the demonological penchant for doubling and circularity. This book addresses the affinities between anti-victimism and demonology, including practitioners' deep-seated investments in the victim/anti-victim dynamic. My ultimate concern, however, is the political effect of anti-victimism. The Cult of True Victimhood serves to undermine collectivity and depoliticize challenges to injustice. For even as they prop ideal forms of true victimhood (and assume the mantle themselves) in the final analysis, anti-victimists aim to suppress, negate, and erase most victim claims. The truest of True Victims are victims who refuse to be victims.

Identity and Politics

Anti-victimists conceive of almost any form of collectivism as inherently victimist, since it undermines individual autonomy by encouraging a profound dependency on the group or the state. Here anti-victimism couples a market-oriented view of individualism and another conception of individuality that

opposes the conformity of mass society, or the stifling conventions of "group think." However, the "ism" in victimism is not a designation of ideology as much as of psychology, for anti-victimists construe victimhood as evidence of a personality type. Claims of victimization are scrutinized through a diagnostic lens as symptoms of an impaired character rather than as matters of verifiable facts. In this regard, it is telling that both Shelby Steele and Wendy Brown—two critics of contemporary identity politics who speak from opposing political perspectives—draw upon Nietzsche's concept of *ressentiment* (in Steele's case only implicitly) to explicate destructive investments in suffering.

Nietzsche warned against a psychological reliance on one's suffering, which he viewed as a will that wants to escape life itself. Civilization, he explained, deprived us of our natural instincts of terribleness, strength, and joy. Because all instincts that cannot be released turn inward, instead we created a "bad conscience" to war with and torture. The duality of "good and evil" expresses the rancor and *ressentiment* of the weak against the "will to power" of the strong. The revenge of the weak is precisely the bad conscience, whereby even the once strong and "primitive" must turn their wills against themselves to live in society. In contrast to those consumed by a backward-looking dependence on the past, Nietzsche challenges us to embrace *amor fati*, to "want nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity."[13]

Steele addresses the melancholic black man who cannot disengage from the past of slavery and discrimination to face the possibilities of the present.[14] Brown warns against what she calls "wounded attachments." She posits that weaker groups recruit the state to protect them from discrimination or to allocate benefits. Through the process of legislation, however, the state comes to define the form of these groups, the substance of their identity, and thus inscribes their public standing as victims. "Legal 'protection' for a certain injury-forming identity," she writes, "discursively entrenches the injury-identity connection it denounces. . . . [S]uch protection codify within the law the very powerlessness it aims to redress."[15] Intertwined with Brown's Foucauldian concern about the license permitted to the state in the inscription of identities is her presumption that all forms of enduring identification are suspect. True freedom entails liberation from the fixity of identity; individuals should engage in continuous and uninterrupted recomposition. Other anti-victimists, albeit in a far less sophisticated manner, likewise view victimhood as a form of identity and that identity as evidence of weakness, fatalism, a rejection of life's promise, and a surrender of individual will to others.

Anti-victimists do not simply probe the victim's mentality to uncover her real affliction; many also prescribe remedies to rehabilitate victimists. Anti-victimism thus becomes another venue through which therapy enters politics. First employed to evaluate individuals, therapeutic logic then colonizes public debates about matters of social policy. This radical inversion of the personal as political belittles political demands by casting them as matters of attitudes or feelings, or other individual inadequacies. In this way, anti-victimism operates as an individuating, atomizing discourse that hails, or as Louis Althusser might put it "interpellates," its subjects by calling into question their personal inno-cence, moral stature, and strength of character, while ignoring their common condition and history.[16] When the startled subject turns back and replies, "I am not a victim I am . . . (something else)," she too is ensnared by anti-victim discourse. Anti-victimists ignore that, as the political theorist Judith Shklar re-marked, victimization "happens to us, it is not a quality."[17] The victim persona they demonize and dissect is largely their own creation.

Identity politics, so goes the argument, is conducive to the victimist per-sonality for it builds on little else beyond a sense of injury, real or perceived, historical, present, or merely potential. The other facilitator of victim politics is the much-dreaded welfare state. This link between victimhood, on the one hand, and victim identity or mentality, on the other, should not be taken for granted. It requires decoupling. After all, acknowledging oneself or one's group as targets of victimization—and properly understanding the means that justify and naturalize such injustice—is arguably a necessary first step toward political action, not an indication of a paralyzing infatuation with misery or of endemic powerlessness. "Suffering and citizenship are not antithetical," Susan Bickford elucidates in her critique of identity politics' opponents, "they are only made so in a context in which others hear claims of oppression solely as assertions of powerlessness. A conception of citizenship adequate to the world in which we live must recognize both the infuriating reality of oppression, and the continual exercise of courage with which citizens meet that oppression."[18]

This conception of consciousness-raising has lain as the cornerstone of radi-cal politics at least since Karl Marx. According to Marx, the proletariat's evolution from "a class in itself to a class for itself" was essential to doing away with class inequality. The Marxian emphasis on an unsentimental recognition of injustice and the precise mechanisms that perpetuate it was meant to facilitate the future revolution; it was not intended to make workers view themselves as eternally exploited. In Marx's vision, the inevitable ascendance of the proletariat would

allow laborers the freedom of detaching themselves from the monochromaticism of factory employment and the possibility of experiencing myriad productive and self-productive opportunities. The end of workers' alienation—from their power to labor, the products of their labor, and their "species-being"—would permit a diversity of activities and correlating affiliations. In one of his few descriptions of life after capitalism Marx explains, "[I]t is possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic."[19]

Late-twentieth-century identity politics in the United States and post-colonialism elsewhere encapsulated a similar promise. Dismantling the forces that sustain hierarchies of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality would free individuals to explore and sustain new possibilities through new identifications. Consciousness-raising sessions among early modern feminists, for instance, were not conceived of as therapeutic venues for desperate and confused homemakers to complain and possibly adapt. On the contrary, such gatherings sought to catalyze transformative action. As Carol Hanisch famously asserted in her defense of personal politics: "Therapy assumes that someone is sick and that there is a cure, i.e., a personal solution. . . . Women are messed over, not messed up. We need to change the objective conditions, not adjust to them."[20]

At the same time, some forms of identity politics gave rise to an opposing approach, the transvaluation of old cultural forms or even stereotypes. In the African American declaration that "Black is beautiful," the feminist celebration of "maternal thinking," or assertions of "gay pride" we may find indications of apprehensions about the radicalism of the future or the desire to cohere around "positive" content rather than merely the anger awakened by injustice. As problematic as such gestures of reverse affirmation may be, they did not amount to an embrace of victim identity. Similarly, whereas anti-victimists charge that American scholars are obsessed with ferreting out real and imaginary past wrongs along lines of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class, in fact over the last three decades there has been a marked shift in academic work to stress agency over oppression.

Scholars researching the past have been looking for historical junctures where minorities or women played a major role in shaping their own destiny as well as that of others. The focus of much research on American slavery, for instance, shifted from emphasizing subjugation to highlighting how slaves resisted their oppression and created their own distinctive culture.[21] A congruent

change may be observed in women's historiography, from documenting women's oppression to uncovering how women empowered themselves as individuals and as a class.[22] Some of these efforts to demonstrate the subversive agency of oppressed groups ascribe such immense powers to victims that the fact of victimization becomes overshadowed, if not lost entirely.[23]

The desire to locate agency in the experience of oppression may also inadvertently carry on the legacy of Marxian thought that rejected the philanthropic calculus of pain and compassion in favor of "scientific" analysis. The working class's claim on history derives not from its collective suffering, but from its production value. Recall that Marx's admiration for the proletariat was matched by his disdain for the lumpen-proletariat. The lumpen were unproductive and therefore devoid of historical significance.

Historical Context

What circumstances contributed to the rise of anti-victimism and the Cult of True Victimhood? Clearly a cardinal factor was the ascendance of a new movement on the political Right that combined a fierce commitment to a market economy with social conservatism. Both positions targeted the liberal federal state, including the social services it provided, from welfare to education. Another branch of the federal government, the Supreme Court, also drew great attention. Decisions about racial justice, criminal procedure, privacy, and even reapportionment galvanized and united conservatives of all ranks. They viewed the Warren Court's decisions about the rights of the accused, for example—securing counsel for the indigent or establishing Miranda rights—as benefiting criminals, creating loopholes for defense lawyers to abuse, and increasing lenient sentencing.[24] To counter the rapid expansion of criminals' rights, President Ronald Reagan declared that the 1980s would be the "decade of the crime victim."

The victim of crime is one among three archetypes of suffering that the invigorated conservative movement promoted, the second being the proverbial casualty of reverse discrimination and other progressive policies, and the third, and most potent, the aborted fetus. In 1973, in *Roe v. Wade*, the Burger Court continued in the footsteps of its predecessor's efforts to expand civil liberties by uncovering in the penumbra of constitutionally enumerated rights a temporary window of privacy that might permit a woman, in consultation with her physician, to terminate her pregnancy. Some fifteen years later, Reagan rallied the troops in a "personhood proclamation" in which he pledged to fight the