

The Rush for Victimhood

Jockeying for underdog status through history

By Miklós Hernádi

In many pockets of societal and international living those with a perceived disadvantage have long tended to ascribe their lack of privileges or outright misery to a victim situation. Victimhood holds out many consolations. By claiming to be victims, even people locked in self-caused misery can sidestep most of the natural causes of their situation on two counts: first, for all the pitiful figure they presently cut, they had clearly made a decent try before losing out and becoming victims, and second, there must have been a fiercely antagonistic agent, the Victimizer, who can be held accountable (retroactively, if need be) for the misery they now find themselves in.

It is the consolation of finding a culprit, an external agent for even self-inflicted losses that explains why so many groups of people, through the ages and across the board, have opted to claim victimhood rather than blame themselves, Nature, or just tough luck for their underdog position. This in spite of the sorry fact that by loudly claiming to be underdogs or losers those people would rarely arouse the admiration of others; no losers, let alone self-acclaimed ones, have ever seriously hoped that others would, on the sheer evidence of the formers' miserable position, think too highly of their personal courage, excellence, or resilience.

Yet, for all the knee-jerk condescension or derision people claiming to be victims tend to induce in others, there is one overriding benefit of claiming victimhood, namely that, at least in tolerant societies touting a banner of equality, the notion of a *redress* immediately arises.

The more credible and well-recognized your victimhood, the greater the redress you are likely to earn, it seems. Before examining victimhoods of seized turf or assets, a downtrodden race, sex, religion, or class, however, I want briefly to look at the moral philosophy behind the issues to be discussed.

Like John Rawls in Section 14 of his *A Theory of Justice*, I want to invoke the process of a betting game in order to illustrate the inevitable falsity of victimhood claims where there are no procedural grounds for them. Would a persistent losing streak entitle losers, however great their losses, to seek "due" compensation from the winners? Could such losers cite their unequal starting positions, a partial treatment, or an unfair outcome if they had entered into the game voluntarily and in full cognizance of the rules equally applicable to all? Would they choose to cite the same perceived grievances and call the outcome unfair if they happened to be in luck's way and swept in much more than they had placed? Clearly, not.

Rawls coins the term "pure procedural justice" for the moral conditions obtaining not just in betting games but, I might add, in countless other social and international interactions including employment, dating, marriages, politics, and even armed

conflicts. These are all procedures where there is a contractual list of rules to be followed, rules clearly known and voluntarily undertaken by all participants. Highest on this list of rules is the tacit acknowledgement of the eventuality for any starting participant to become a loser without earning the right to call someone else's bluff and seek compensation, and conversely, for any participant to become a winner without being branded as victimizer and drained of his or her gains.

"The betting procedure is fair and freely entered into under conditions that are fair", Rawls writes. "Now any distribution of cash summing to the initial stock held by all individuals could result from a series of fair bets. In this sense all of these particular distributions are equally fair."

Now, were some losing participants suddenly to claim victimhood on the grounds that they had been cruelly fouled by their luck, a development they cannot ascribe to any other agency than some other participants' persistent winning streaks, the victimhood claims would clearly appear as mere ploys to *dominate* the game rather than make sure it continues fairly, i.e. with the future chance, equal to all, of a possible redistribution of successful bets among losing and winning participants. False victimhood claims artificially introduce gross inequality into a game of jointly acknowledged fairness incurring losses where there were gains, and providing gains where there were losses by simply demanding the establishment of a new "rule of redress" totally extraneous to the rules hitherto adhered to.

Consider 1920s Germany and Hungary demanding the return by Entente countries of territories they had lost to them in WWI; Arab countries demanding the return of territories they alleged to have lost (rather failed to conquer) during their concerted attacks upon Israel since 1948; Islam as such demanding the return of Al Andalus lost to Spain in the Middle Ages, and, by the same token, most of the Balkans successively lost to modern Christian nations in the 18th-19th centuries; furthermore, "maimed" Serbia's claims on "ancient Serb terrain" long inhabited by creeds and cultures utterly different from those of Serbia—those are only a few victimhood ploys (their list could fill many pages) whose principal objective it is to attain unearned dominance rather than any return to fairness.

The built-in advantage of a victimhood ploy clearly springs from the contrast of the utter weakness routinely implied in victimhood on the one hand, and on the other, the exuberance, not to say ferocity with which the alleged victim invariably clamors for others' attention and unreserved compliance. Radical feminists love to make frequent use of this contrast as they claim that over half the Earth's population, i.e. all girls and women including many basking in affluence and admiration are in fact a cruelly oppressed "minority", more of which a little later.

For good measure, let me now turn to a procedure of social justice that is designed to provide assets and preferential treatment to participants who *truly* happen to be underprivileged victims through no fault of their own. Rawls calls this kind of handicap "native", "natural" or "arbitrary". Descendants of harshly treated black or Native Americans as well as of other pauperized and abused aboriginals across the continents all fall into this category often tied up with race. Although present victims can hardly

cite any contemporary cause for their current backwardness or distress, nor are they ever likely to trail and nail their forefathers' victimizers to settle old bills with them, they can with quite some legitimacy demand retroactive compensation from the *descendants* of their victimizers who are theoretically still in possession of the wealth and privileges attained by their forefathers at the expense of enslaved or colonized aboriginals.

Now, there are two problems with this kind of distributive justice; first, the considerable lapse of time between the actual offence and the damages offered, and second, the lack of *individual* adjudication, the only kind admissible to most scholars of law, since both the (descendants of) victims and (those of) their erstwhile victimizers are inevitably lumped into two distinct groups on the sole surviving evidence of their respective race. People of color are invariably held victims while whites are invariably held perpetrators irrespective of their past or present actions, preferences, or mindsets. Against a background of the overwhelming truth of that moral distribution, Robert Bolt's play *The Mission* presents clear cases of a reverse victimhood of white Jesuits sacrificing themselves for the freedom of Amazonian Indians in the 17th century, and the callous indifference of contemporary colored slave traders rounding their brethren up and selling them into slavery for peanuts.

In any case, Rawls, I think rightly, makes little of those two problems as he proposes to agree to regard "the distribution (in a just society) of natural talents as a *common asset* and to share in the benefits of this distribution whatever this turns out to be. Those", he goes on to say in Section 17 of his tome, "who have been favored by nature, whoever they are, may gain from their good fortune *only on terms that improve the situation* of those who have lost out." (My italics: M.H.)

Clearly, this is the notion of redress simply added to the pure procedural rules of the betting game discussed above. Leaving the vital issue of degrees aside, I think it is only fair to allot some advantages to *handicapped* participants (who are to be lauded for putting in an appearance at all) by, say, allowing them to place smaller bets at first for the same possible gains, and perhaps even, should they lose out, reimburse them for some part of their losses at the end.

Unfortunately, this kind of game a.k.a. affirmative action specially designed to compensate for uncontested, well-recognized past grievances, does not entirely rule out recourse to the victimhood ploy.

Snatching victimhood status from your opponent is probably the best-loved ploy of all simply because it promises many dividends, one of which being the right to claim moral superiority, i.e. the "fact" that yours is *the* just cause cleared, more often than not, by a divine nod. Long drawn out ethnic and/or religious conflicts rarely go without attempts made by one of the two warring parties (usually the more prosperous and populous one) to come into the sole and ultimate possession of victimhood, a status that should in fact be at least shared after centuries of recurring mutual bloodsheds.

Shortly after heinously dismembering his sleeping Armenian fellow-officer with an axe in 2004, Azeri military officer Safarov, on a NATO sponsored course in Budapest,

justified his act with the utter victimhood, at Armenian hands, of his family and nation. N.B. Post-Soviet Azerbaijan is an oil-rich, Muslim country with a large segment of its population living peacefully in Iran; post-Soviet Christian Armenia is an impoverished nation with a large segment of its population forced to seek employment in neighboring Turkey, the site of a massive anti-Armenian drive of true genocidal proportions in 1916.

The dividends of victimhood snatched from Armenia?

After serving 7 years of his sentence for life in a Budapest jail, Safarov was extradited amid wide international condemnation to his native Azerbaijan in August 2012 where, rather than being put into an Azeri jail to continue his sentence, he was welcomed by the President on the tarmac as a free man, promoted, decorated, reimbursed for his unpaid years in prison, given a luxurious apartment to live in, and declared a national hero with many Azeri streets named after him. (As an act of Azeri gratitude, a Hungarian-Azeri trading house was duly established in the Azeri capital only months after the extradition.)

Attempts by oil-rich Arab and non-Arab Muslims at snatching victimhood from the Jewish people, torn and decimated by centuries of pogroms, the Holocaust, and recurring wars of aggression, are far too numerous to examine in detail; the ultimate argument for alleged Arab victimhood being that a tiny minority of Arabs is still forced to live in “exile” on account of the callous and grossly unjustified Jewish “occupation” of ancient Arab terrain. In fact, the Palestinian Arabs, not even all of them, who chose to abandon their domiciles when the 1948 Arab attack on newly recognized Israel got underway, obeyed Arab military orders conveyed through loudspeakers rather than responded to any Israeli incentive.

If anything, they were and are credulous victims of their fellow-Arabs; the more so since not a single attempt has been made since 1948 by their prosperous Arab neighbors, upon whose land they once relocated as “refugees”, to integrate and lift them. Meanwhile, their brethren opting to remain under Israeli “rule” have seen a tenfold drop in infant mortality and the rise of several new universities for Arabs in “occupied” Judea and Samaria.

The tactical nature of their insistence on remaining in a “refugee”, i.e. victim status rather than becoming freely relocating citizens of the immense Arab nation, is clearly visible from a statement made by Zahir Mussein, then military chief of the PLO, to a Dutch daily in 1977: “The moment we manage to regain the whole of Palestine, we shall not waste a minute before we unite Palestine with Jordan.” (*Dagblad de Vierdieping Trouw*, 31 March, 1977)

Denying and expropriating Jewish victimhood is a ploy that had emerged long before Nazism; Austrian arch-Anti-Semite Schönenerer had started out in the 1880s (the time of cruel pogroms and blood-libel trials throughout Eastern Europe) by maintaining that the huge oak-tree of the German race, however tough and resilient at first sight, was in mortal danger of falling because the sly lines of Jewish ivy creeping up around its trunk and branches were mercilessly sucking away at its strength and determination. The

mighty oak-tree was soon to become a helpless victim in the perpetual struggle of the races for survival unless Germans could destroy those suffocating Jewish lines of ivy before it was too late. Thus, prospective victims that they were, Germans were undertaking a just campaign of *self-defense* as they braced for their war against the Jews.

Nazi recaps of this basic theme are too well-known to need elaboration here. I just want to mention a lesser-known offshoot of the basic theme from the time this particular victimhood ploy was unerringly put into practice in German-occupied Hungary, in the spring of 1944.

The territory of Hungary, slightly enlarged by the Nazi-assisted return of parts of Romania, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, and Serbia with considerable Jewish populations, was divided into 6 districts, and each of those districts had first been declared “war operation zones” before their Jews were rounded up, crammed into ghettos, and eventually deported to Auschwitz. (The first district to be made *judenrein* was the one around Elie Wiesel’s native Sighet in the North-Eastern Carpathian Mountains.) It is worth noting that adult Jewish males were mostly away doing hazardous unarmed labor service in the Eastern front then hundreds of miles away.

Now, although the overt objective of the anti-Jewish drive was to supply much needed labor force to the Reich as previously agreed by the Führer and Regent Horthy, the fact that the districts were covertly declared “war operation zones” as deportations continued from district to district much rather suggests that the armed Hungarian authorities in charge of the ghettoization and deportation of the Jews preferred to view *themselves* as potential victims of a mortal threat posed by an “excessive concentration” of enfeebled, defenseless Jews maliciously labeled to be covert agents of the Allied forces (cf. with Ch. 17 of R. L. Braham’s definitive *The Politics of Genocide*). If thousands of Hungarian administrators and law enforcement agents had been reluctant to recognize victimhood even when they saw it unfolding in front of their very eyes, and, to boot, of their own making, then, inevitably, a lot more reluctant were many Hungarian opinion makers to concede it when the dust settled, i.e. in the immediate aftermath of WWII. An all too real Jewish victimhood had to be counterbalanced by assorted cases of non-Jewish victimhood, real or imagined; the sheer difficulty of the project explains why it took so many forms. Some claimed to be victims of an over-dramatization of the allegedly larger-than-life sufferings of Jewish survivors; some others claimed to be victims of gross Jewish ingratitude considering the great number of Jews saved from their deaths by compassionate Christian helpers risking their own lives; still others maintained the suffering of Jewish labor servicemen and even the deportees was way smaller than that endured by Christian Hungarian soldiers fighting in the frontlines, and their families starving if not bombed out; yet others envisaged a comprehensive Jewish revenge against innocent Christians for crimes they had never committed. Instigated by left-wing politicians, would-be Christian “victims” even organized pre-emptive lynchings claiming several lives in some provincial settings in 1946 against so-called “food-hoarding black marketeers” (Jewish survivors, needless to say).

Even Germans, more enlightened and soul-searching on the whole than most Hungarians, have recently embarked on a media campaign of trying to whitewash the

perpetration of the Holocaust while simultaneously trying to deprive Europe's Jewry of their bitter heritage of the ultimate in victimization. In a COMMENTARY article (January, 2004) Bartosz Jalowiecki listed the following arguments purporting to obliterate or snatch some well-established Jewish victimhood positions: Nazi concentration camps were way more humane than Soviet ones; the bombings of Dresden and other "peaceable" German cities were far more barbaric acts than anything the German Army may have committed against Jews or anyone else; the forced re-settlement into Germany of East Europe's German population was punishment entirely undeserved, etc. The conclusion being that the German nation was *at least as much, if not more*, a victim of WWII as Europe's Jewry was.

If you think you can travel across less troubled waters when considering the victimhood issue as it appears in feminist identity politics in this final section, you are badly mistaken. The fight for victimhood and its lucrative dividends (available most often through litigation) has probably been more ferocious in recent feminism than in any other arena of modern politics. Promulgators of feminist victimhood claims abound in most countries of the Northern hemisphere. While the intensity of their rhetoric is unmistakable, they tend to blend in with other ideological opinion makers in that their position in social life differs utterly from that of most of their protégées. Carefree intellectuals setting out to assist and lift the exploited working classes come to mind here, but a well-to-do, chauffeur-driven and spotlessly waited-on bishop preaching delayed otherworldly gratification to his flock engrossed as they are in day-to-day needs and worries is also a case in point. Likewise, feminist pace-setters are, as a rule, affluent, independent, often glamorous celebrities as opposed to the masses of grey, unimaginative, clueless women they pledge to steer toward the good life. How to get dominance out of victimhood? No other sphere of social interaction can provide better recipes than feminist identity politics.

Although in actual fact women are overwhelmingly admired, served and protected by men mostly for their most privileged, sex-specific capacity to produce and nurse babies, pregnancy, childbirth and nursing are routinely considered by feminists to be the root causes of women's general victimhood brought on and kept up by patriarchal men rather than Mother Nature. It is this particular, fundamental victimhood gambit that lays the foundation for countless other subsidiary moves leading to an ever increasing measure of dominance of women over men. (Recall if you will the wholly extraneous "rule of redress" introduced into the "pure procedural justice" of Rawls' betting game with its immediate dominance effect.)

From the moment on when women's fundamental victimhood gets recognized, as it has done, as an unshakable ground for guilt-ridden compensations, women become eligible to preferential treatment ("affirmative action") in such broad, otherwise egalitarian areas as education, employment, science and the arts, taxation, health, retirement, and the entire justice system, i.e. areas that embrace practically the whole of social existence.

I could run up a long list of special attentions, favors, and endowments women are likely to glean from social institutions by just tacitly citing their uninterrupted

victimhood in a society apparently governed by powerful male women-haters including evil-minded legislators, executives, vice-chancellors, board members, judges, administrators, and the like. Surprisingly, those very officials can be seen to be continually going out of their way to give unearned good marks, lucrative part-time jobs, special grants and bonuses, tax breaks, cutting-edge health cures, unconditional custody rulings, and acquittals or ultra-mild prison sentences, etc. to flocks of women whose response can be predicted to be: "This only goes to show how guilty you males are of putting us into servitude in the first place."

I want to finish off with a single area out of very many. Lethal *domestic violence* has long been publicized as the prime area in which women's utter victimhood can best be demonstrated. Literate readers of these lines might recall that the two most memorable spouse-killings in great literature, i.e. of Agamemnon and the elder Hamlet, were both co-committed or commissioned by their respective *wives*, Clytemnestra and Gertrude. (Othello's killing of his wife Desdemona occurred out of a fatal misunderstanding.) Now, the remarkable thing about spouse-killings today is that wives committing or just commissioning the murder of their husbands get away with their complicity in, or even outright guiltiness of, murder precisely the same way as the murder of Agamemnon and the elder Hamlet both went down in history not as lethal domestic violence done by females but as *non-domestic* violence done by males, Aegisthus and Claudius, who were both, incidentally, extramarital lovers of the queens.

But such "non-domestic" male-male violence, however frequent, never gets into domestic violence counts today. Stan, Kate's lover, can kill Steve, Kate's husband without Kate's name or the notion of lethal domestic violence ever emerging. In his *The Myth of Male Power* Warren Farrell explains why female lethal violence keeps such a low profile in official statistics. Contract killing, if discovered at all, is recorded as (non-domestic) "multiple offender killing"; it never gets recorded as a wife killing her husband to all intents and purposes. Nor do most full-fledged husband-killings committed personally by the wives (most frequently by poisoning them) ever qualify as *murder* because poison killing is most often recorded as a heart attack or accident. Another type of lethal domestic violence, the one committed against infants raised in the family, which is carried out overwhelmingly by the infants' *mothers*, escapes entirely the "murder" category by qualifying only as "infanticide", a crime never included in counts of lethal domestic violence.

Thus, we are on extremely safe ground when we say that at least as many, if not more, women as men commit domestic murder on a day-to-day basis. For a refutation of the all-embracing innocent victimhood thesis concerning women in a domestic setting we must use our common powers of observation rather than give credit to feminist rants about the unbearable servitude, i.e. victimhood, women must shoulder when marrying men.

This is how Farrell explains why the profile of husband-murdering women is so low: "The belief that women are *by nature innocent* allowed a woman to poison her husband, have him die of a heart attack, not be suspected, and the corpse not be checked for traces of poison." (My italics: M.H.)

If few women get caught for their domestic violence, while practically all men do, still fewer are likely to get overly harsh sentences. Even the most bestial of husband-killing women prosecuted for their crimes can hope for preferential, i.e. ultra-mild treatment in the criminal courts; infanticides are not even prosecuted. A Hungarian criminal study in the 1970s drew up the following equation: the more bestial a woman becomes in her murderous ways, the surer we can be that previous to her act she was a victim of her husband, a state for which she only retaliated. Therefore, even for her bestiality, her *victim*, i.e. her husband is to blame.

So much for the high-powered dividends inherent in taken-for-granted female victimhood, real or imagined.

MIKLÓS HERNÁDI has published widely on phenomenological sociology, divorce, Otto Weininger, and the Hungarian Holocaust. He lives in Budakeszi, Hungary.