

No Victims, No Oppression: Feminist Theory and the Denial of Victimhood

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Refereed paper presented to the
Australasian Political Studies Association conference
University of Newcastle
25-27 September

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Abstract

This paper examines feminists' engagement with victim discourse in the light of backlash criticism of claims to victim status by women and other disadvantaged groups at the height of the debates about 'political correctness' in the early 1990s. Feminists were criticised for supposedly positioning women in a perpetual state of 'victimhood' with respect to institutionalised male oppression. Feminist rejoinders to this interpretation of the feminist agenda have been sporadic. A large body of feminist analysis unquestioningly eschews the use of the 'victim' label, appearing thereby to implicitly accept the version of 'victim' as it was negatively constructed by the backlash. In doing so, it replicates backlash connotations given to terms like 'victimology' and 'victimhood'. This paper argues that there are important political implications in having victim status acknowledged, and therefore in feminists' failure to adequately contest backlash denigration of victim claims. Rather than appear to respond to backlash criticism by rejecting the label altogether, feminists should perhaps work towards dismantling the backlash construction of the victim and thereby challenge the vested political interests that inspired it.

Introduction

It is relatively uncontroversial to assert that contemporary feminist theorists have avoided framing women's oppression in terms of victimhood and have favoured accounts that emphasise instead women's resistance and agency. Yet such a seemingly straightforward assertion already contains two problematic assumptions – the term 'victimhood' is used as if it is a completely neutral signifier, which it is not; and the word 'instead' implies that being a victim and being an agent are mutually exclusive. I will return to these two assumptions below. Feminists have long debated the advantages and risks of claiming victim status as part of political strategies aimed at securing women's political and social rights. And paralleling these struggles have been counter, even anti-feminist, campaigns aimed at maintaining the status quo. One particularly virulent version of this has been hostile representations of feminism from outside the movement that have focused on feminism's supposed promotion of a collective identity for women based on shared victim status. These representations have been part of a wider context of victim-blaming discourse that reached a crescendo in conservative attacks during the early 1990s, largely deploying a discourse of 'political correctness'. In this paper I will show how feminist concerns over the idea of 'victimhood' came to be exploited by this socially conservative discourse in such a way that feminist theorists generally eschewed the idea of 'victimhood', and in some cases repudiated it. In so doing, quite diverse feminisms ended up replicating, consciously or otherwise, these anti-feminist attacks and thereby failed to challenge the vested political interests that have inspired them. I argue that there are important political implications in having victim status acknowledged, and therefore in feminists' failure to adequately contest the discrediting of victim claims. Rather than appear to respond to backlash criticism by rejecting the label altogether, feminists should perhaps work towards dismantling the backlash construction of the victim.

The rhetorical attacks were deployed under the discursive banner of 'political correctness'. This discourse positioned those who supported various forms of social

justice as oppressors, while those making accusations of 'political correctness' positioned themselves as champions of free speech and mainstream values. This constituted a discursive counter-strategy aimed at attempts to empower the socially and structurally disadvantaged, and formed the crux of what became known as backlash literature. In turn, the powerful and privileged were repositioned as themselves victims of the political strategies of 'special interests'. It was somewhat ironic, therefore, that this discourse promulgated the idea of 'victimhood' as a negative identity which embodied a number of assumptions: that claims of victimisation by 'minority' groups were exaggerated and supporting evidence largely fabricated (Iannone 2000/2001; Williamson 1996, 115; Dench 2000, 47), and that the 'cult of victimhood' was adopted as a deliberate political strategy designed to obtain 'special treatment' and institutional advantage through cynical manipulation of public sympathy (Hollander 1994, 41-2, and 1996, 60-1; Richardson 1991).

It is not within the scope of this paper to defend the foregoing claims about the discourse of 'political correctness'; that is undertaken elsewhere. Here I intend to concentrate on exploring the various ways that the denigration of victimhood within that discourse fed into a range of feminist discourses. In what follows I argue that replication of conservative assumptions about victims permeates academic feminist analysis to the extent that denigration of 'victimhood' has been almost completely naturalised within the literature to be reviewed later in the paper. The overwhelming assumption of the vast body of this analysis is that portraying oneself or other women as victims is to be avoided at all costs. Victimhood is a state of mind engaged in as a matter of choice, rather than a matter of fact, and is a regressive relic of the 'second-wave' beyond which a now more enlightened feminism is well pleased to have progressed. This temporal configuration is disturbingly similar to the way key figures within the 'political correctness' discourse cast feminists and others as barbarian hordes who threatened the modern, civilised world and obstructed individual progress and productive debate through affirmative action and the enactment of speech codes (D'Souza 1992a; Kramer 1992, 316). The irony of these debates was that they often took the form of a struggle over who could legitimately claim victim status – the claim of 'reverse victimisation' by privileged conservatives implicitly recognised the political advantage of having that status publicly validated (Cole 1999, 88).

Victimhood and its Critics

The contemporary construction of victimhood involved redescribing victims of oppression (or any abuse of power) and their experiences, whether individually or in groups, in dismissive or negative ways. According to this reasoning, these groups were disaffected whingers, who pleaded victimhood as a justification for underachievement and failure to accept individual responsibility. Another supposed incentive to cling to victim status was the opportunity it afforded to claim innocence and moral superiority in the face of hostile social forces against which individuals were powerless to act without the intervention of protective bureaucratic measures. Though intended to redress inequalities, it was claimed that this protective relationship merely locked its beneficiaries into a state of perpetual victimhood on which the provision of these compensatory measures relied (Richardson 1991; Kersten 1991; Hollander 1994, 60).

Such measures were not needed except in the most extreme of cases because the ‘merit principle’ would always operate to recognise individual effort; therefore victim status could always potentially be overcome. In the same vein, the effects of racist or sexist attitudes could be rebuffed at the level of the individual because the assumed absence of entrenched structural oppression (especially patriarchy) meant such offences did not carry the particular toxicity that was claimed to exist by their targets. Accounts of the subjective hurt of the victims of discrimination were ridiculed as part of a “‘hurt feeling’ movement’ (Klatt 2003, 44). Throughout this victim-blaming discourse, ‘victimhood’ emerges as a state of mind and collective identity that has nothing to do with actually being a victim, since the existence of structural disadvantage is denied.

The delegitimisation of victim claims relied on a long-standing cultural construction of the victim that required complete innocence and proven incapacity to avoid victimisation, either because resistance was impossible or because all resources of agency have been exhausted. Since it is difficult to prove the negative, claims to victim status are often distrusted. ‘Victimhood’ is a role, a ‘mantle’ that is consciously taken on, a cult whose followers assume an undifferentiated perspective that legitimises and breeds passivity, and denies the possibility of any agency that might transcend victim status on the one hand, or be construed as a mitigating the moral capital of innocent helplessness on the other. This disproportionate emphasis on victims’ interests was also frequently decried as ‘victimology’, a ‘faddish, pseudo-scientific [folly]’ that constituted one of the ‘principles and mechanisms of PC’ (Klatt 2003, 44). The real victims were supposedly those forced to adhere to speech and conduct codes, those whose professional advancement was threatened by affirmative action which was represented as always a violation of the merit principle (D’Souza 1992a, 21; Kramer 1992, 321), and those (male) academics ‘hounded out’ of their jobs in the wake of sexual harassment charges (Robinson 2001, 31, 33). These victims were by definition not engaging in either victimhood or victimology; they were instead themselves victimised by the ‘truncheon’ of victimhood (D’Souza 1992, 243). Feminists were cast as being amongst the worst offenders. In a section of *Tenured Radicals* entitled ‘The Feminist Assault’, Roger Kimball picks out radical feminism as being in the vanguard of the maligned liberalisation of higher education, ‘the single biggest challenge to the canon as traditionally conceived’ (1990, 15).

It has been commonly noted that the views of a particular group of self-described feminists are closely aligned with these anti-feminist attacks. This group usually includes any or all of Camille Paglia, Christina Hoff Sommers, Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf (Atmore 1999, 183; Gavey 1999, 61; McDermott 1995, 669; Mardorossian 2002, 748; Haag 1996, 24; Kozol 1995, 648), but sometimes includes the likes of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Rene Denfeld and Daphne Patai (Cole 2000, 135; Minnich 1998, 159). This group sets itself apart from more recognizably feminist sentiments by overt attacks on contemporary feminists (or ‘gender feminists’ as Sommers calls them, 1994, 16) and by questioning the validity of data on issues like date rape and sexual harassment. Aside from Wolf (whom Atmore ranks as the least conservative (1999, 186)) they are cited admiringly in a number of journals associated with opposition to ‘political correctness’ (see, amongst numerous examples, Iannone 2000-2001, 32 and 1993, 51; Kaiser 2000, 72; Kimball 1993; Young 1994, 56). These journals include *Academic Questions*, the journal of the National Association of Scholars (the self-appointed guardians of

conservative academia – see Ravitch 2005, 7, 18; D’Souza 1992, 18) and *New Criterion* under the leadership of Kimball. My subsequent analysis will leave aside these more obvious ‘anti-victim feminists’ (AVFers in Cole’s discourse, 2000, 136) to concentrate on analysis that is more readily identifiable as feminist theory.

Feminisms and Anti-victimhood

In order to understand how the discourse of victimhood has featured within feminist literature, a number of feminist journals were surveyed: from the US, *Signs* (1975+), *Feminist Studies* (1972+), *differences* (1992+), *Hypatia* (1986+), from the UK, *Feminist Review* (1979+) and from Australia, *Hecate* (1984+)¹. This survey forms part of a wider ongoing investigation of feminist journal literature and the idea of victimhood. I also draw on Sharon Lamb’s (1999) edited collection, *New Version of Victims*, because it is one of the only concentrated book-length attempts by feminists to confront the way the ‘victim’ has been constructed. Later in the paper I also discuss a very recent development in the representation of victimhood, a full chapter in a student oriented textbook, *Introduction to Political Theory*, published earlier this year (Hoffman and Graham 2006). Hoffman and Graham overtly encourage politics students to be suspicious, if not disdainful, of ‘victimhood’.

In the six journals noted above, over the last couple of decades, the word ‘victim’ no longer designates a position in a power structure, but rather an individual psychology marked by self-delusion and incomplete personhood (Haraway 1997, 65; Throsby 2004, 141; Gilmore 2003, 710). Adjectives like ‘unwitting’, ‘helpless’, and especially ‘passive’ are so habitually attached to ‘victim’ as inherent attributes that the only variation made possible is that of the knowing, resisting agent. The phrase ‘passive victims’ runs like a mantra through much of the writing, occurring in the singular or plural (mostly plural) 54 times in *Signs*, 27 times in *Feminist Review*, and 22 times in *Feminist Studies*. The vast majority of the occurrences are after 1988 i.e. in the period in which ‘political correctness’ discourse is in the ascendancy. It is less frequent in *Hecate* (6), though where it is used the same assumptions about victimhood and resistance underpin its use².

The static and monolithic nature assigned to ‘victimhood’ is assumed to automatically disqualify other character components or elements of consciousness (Watson 2002, 414; Garrison 2000, 161; Guy 1996, 157; Brabazon 2000, 102; Clegg 1999, 80). Despite what postmodern theorists have had to say about the impossibility of positing a pre-given subject, or core self that can be found once contingencies are stripped away, the belief persists that feminist progress will consist in casting aside the supposedly flawed subject of victimhood in favour of the whole personhood of the

¹ Note that for the purposes of this paper analysis of the journals was performed using electronic searching, given the volume of material to be surveyed. The dates listed represent the extent of each journal’s online availability, and in most cases, correspond to the actual publication start date. The exceptions are *differences* and *Hecate*, which were published from 1989 and 1975 respectively.

² It is recognised that there are limits to the conclusions that can be drawn from purely numerical analyses of this nature, without a detailed analysis of context. Nevertheless, I think it is still reasonable to assert that even in cases where the author might wish to repudiate the portrayal of individuals in this way, the repetition of such a recognisable trope does nothing to ‘denaturalise’ the conjoining of victimhood and passivity. A cursory examination of these instances suggests that where such repudiations exist, they usually entail a challenge to the fact of victim status alone, rather than to its association with lack of resistance.

responsible, clear-sighted agent. There is little space in which to theorise a victim-subject with a variable psychology that includes the undeluded awareness of victimisation, responses to which may also vary over time. Indeed, the subjectivity of the victim often disappears with the premise that seeing someone as a victim objectifies them (Lamb 1999, 113; Mankekar 1997, 54; Alcoff and Gray 1993, 277). Yet this objectification is largely entailed in the contemporary construction of the victim, since the only subject allowed is the resisting subject. If the 'subject' is 'who we are, who we think we are, how we think, how we act' (Lamb 1999, 132), there seems to be no basis on which to invalidate the subjectivity of the self-defined victim, or to privilege certain kinds of subjectivity as 'truer' than others.

The extent to which resistance might legitimately be presented as the opposite of passivity, but not of victim status, is left unexamined by the habit of understanding these states as coterminous. In fact, the positing of resistance or agency in opposition to passivity is itself problematic, since the nature of the passivity in question is not clear. It often appears to refer to a holistic inertia that has been merely intuited from lack of observable or effective resistance. In this model, physical resistance to rape, for instance, provides the obvious antidote to the scripted docility from which victimisation results (Marcus 1992, 395). Once again, earlier victimological literature provides an alternative reading, whereby resistance to rape is assumed as the premise of any subsequent response to the threat of assault (Griffin and Griffin 1981, 61). These responses may include 'passive techniques' (Griffin and Griffin 1981, 66) and non-resistance as an 'intelligent, rational strategy' (Ruch and Hennesy 1982, 102). The concept of passivity as an agentic strategy, the product of the conscious decision-making of a multi-layered subject, is absent from later writing that focuses on what the women can 'do' to avert the attack (Bart and O'Brien 1984; Heberle 1996; Hall 2004). Apart from the fact that physical resistance has been seen to have limited effectiveness in avoiding rape (Becker et al. 1982, 108; Griffin and Griffin 1981, 59; Ruch and Hennesy 1982, 102), the later emphasis on fighting back limits the victimisation caused by rape to instantiated acts of penetration. Bart and O'Brien did recognise that their division into 'raped women' and 'rape avoiders' was rather arbitrary (1984, 86) and complicated by the variety of ways women conceptualised their experiences (89). That this distinction is even relevant in terms of the ultimate aim of helping women avoid trauma is questionable, since victims of attempted rape have been shown to have similar responses to their attack as 'complete rape victims' (Becker et al. 1982, 106).

On the basis of this simplistic version of passivity, anything that appears to reinforce it, and hence reify victim status, is abjured, in particular mechanisms of state 'protection'. Conceptualising these measures as 'protection' contributes to the metaphorical cohesion whereby the 'paternalistic' state 'infantilises' women and dictates the conclusion that women should reject these measures as counter to their interests (Gilmore 2003, 706-7; Hall 2004, 6; Brown 1995, 169-70; Heberle 1996, 68; see also Bickford 1997, 113). The crux of that objection from a feminist point of view is surely that this protection casts 'women' as victims, yet it is precisely the failure of such legislative measures to really protect women as a group, and thereby address systemic discrimination, that has also been critiqued (Heberle 1996, 69; Hengehold 2000, 205; Gilmore 2003, 706-7; Valverde 1999, 345). The neutrality of the law requires that anti-discrimination legislation, for instance, cannot specify which sex, race, religion, etc. is

most likely to be discriminated against, and therefore often fails the groups for which it was intended. Indeed, Heberle's complaint that recourse to the state 'literally individuates women as vulnerable objects of masculinist power' (1996, 69) seems aimed paradoxically at both risks at once – the positing of 'women' as victimisation-prone, *and* the individualisation of that oppression when addressed through injury compensation and punishment. Kristin Bumiller's analysis of the model of legal protection implies that the existence of mechanisms of redress does not in itself predefine individuals or groups as victims (1987, 422), but do require that they take on that 'role' during the process of seeking compensation (433). This assumes the unfavourable treatment did not render these women victims in the first place, an assumption that permeates this suspicion of state protection – that it creates victims, rather than responds to pre-existing realities of victimisation (cf. D'Souza 1992, 243).

For some feminists, merely naming victims as such, or articulating oppression, is seen to produce the psychology of the victim (Fernandes 1999, 141; Guy 1996, 160; Bumiller 1987, 423; Gavey 1999, 62; Lamb 1999, 109). The causation that used to be accepted, that subordination creates victims, has been inverted. Heberle speculates that it might be useful to configure sexual violence as 'the sign of the instability of masculinity rather than the sign of the totality of patriarchal power' (1996, 67), that is, the devastation of rape has been discursively magnified and reified in order to shore up the illegitimate power of the patriarchy (also Hengehold 2000, 194). It is troubling to consider what the endpoint of that reasoning might be – would more sexual violence signify greater instability? If the goal is to subvert male power by not engaging with it on its own terms (73), then even physically resisting that power might be more problematic than Heberle allows. Whilst one should not underestimate the power of discourse in shaping the way events are interpreted and experienced, the trend in the literature examined so far is to emphasise that at the expense of highlighting the 'reality' that has prompted certain discursive choices in the first place. From outside a strictly feminist perspective, Martha Mahoney warns against the too facile assumption that a sense of agency automatically extirpates victim status. It can instead '[reinforce] the societal denial of the very existence of oppression' by playing into the popular belief that self-actualisation is the result of simply adjusting individual psychology (1994, 61-2).

Susan Wendell (1990) equates victimhood and denial of individual responsibility in her model of choice under conditions of oppression. This model comprises a number of 'perspectives'. The oppressed often initially adopt the perspective of the oppressor i.e. they refuse, or are unable, to recognise their victimisation (24). When they do, they pass to the perspective of the victim (25), but its immobilising effects must be superseded by the 'perspective of the responsible actor' (29). However, at this stage, women are no less angry about their victimisation (32), are still prone to self-deception from human fallibility or the misrepresentations of a sexist society (31), and should still allocate blame where appropriate, but not so much as to regress to the victim perspective (32). Yet how much is too much, and who amongst either the self-deceivers or oppressors might have the necessary detachment to adjudge that is not made clear, despite the fact that Wendell recognises the important function the 'appropriate' amount of blame has in publicly setting moral standards (29). In short, it appears that these women are still victims, and share many of the characteristics Wendell attributes to the victim perspective. The unique marker of the new perspective is the taking on of responsibility - for what, women will

still be uncertain, since conditions of oppression (the very thing that renders them victims in fact) make it difficult to discern what the choices are (31). Evidently, the awareness of one's victim status (as opposed to just being a victim) is incompatible with responsible resistance, since the model casts those with that awareness as 'irresponsible non-actors' by implication.

For a similar concept of victimhood as underdevelopment, see also Fernandes (1999, 140), Gilmore (2003, 706), Bulbeck (1999, 9). Cheri Register (1980) provides an earlier version of Wendell's stages of victim consciousness, the angry victim stage being eclipsed by 'transcendence into full personhood' (281), the victim being assumed to be completely undifferentiated. She offers her analysis to counter the 'woman-as-victim model that undergirds so much feminist criticism' (270), a trend that it is fair to say would probably not have troubled Register were she writing ten years later. Similarly, Carol Christ (1976) examined the possibilities of 'leaving off' being a victim through reconstruction of the individual psyche. Yet it should be noted that at the time she was writing, she at least felt that it was necessary to mount a case that would answer Marge Piercy's doubts about the capacity of one woman to challenge actual power imbalances, rather than take for granted the admissibility of her position (317). It should also be born in mind that at about the same time, the ahistorically political nature of rape as a mechanism of inducing generalised submission was still being hotly contested in the same journal, in an article (Shorter 1977) that barely mentions 'victim' or its derivatives. Edward Shorter critiqued Susan Brownmiller's analysis of rape in *Against Our Will* by suggesting that the politicisation of rape was a relatively new phenomenon and a function of the greater availability of sex (to men). Prior to this, rape was driven by the need to find sexual satisfaction in a socio-historical context that did not offer many legitimate opportunities to do so (473-4). The coercion that men could exercise to obtain extra-marital sex when the consequences of this for women were extremely deleterious (474) does not qualify as 'political' for Shorter, because he defines politics as 'jousting for resources which one does not already control' (475). That does not include questions about how power is retained by those who do have it, nor how that power structure is normalised. In such a climate, it is perhaps not surprising that Carol Christ felt the need to justify the individualizing propensity of the psychological approach, a qualm not exhibited by many of her successors.

The reason why victim status, and especially its internalised mentality, 'victimhood', were considered as counter to the emancipatory project is that it supposedly precludes any number of other character components, especially personal responsibility (Wendell 1990; Warner 2004, 501) and agency (Bahar 2003, 1025; Bumiller 1987, 433; Flint 2006, 527; Warner 2004, 501; Third 2002, 83; Hammonds 1997, 36; Rogoff 1997). The agency it denies may be that which facilitates resistance, or that which is exercised in any apparent complicity with coercive practices (the subtext being that these practices are less coercive, and hence less victimizing, if women participate in them with apparent willingness). The 'proper' victim is required to be demonstrably innocent (Sweeney 2004, 470; Haag 1996, 60). Attacks on minority groups' allegedly cynical quest for 'the moral capital of victimhood' (D'Souza 1992, 242) were aimed at discrediting the presumed innocence of these groups, and hence their victim status. In the past, feminists have been quick to point out the distortions of justice produced by the construction of the 'innocent victim' (Kitzinger 1988, 80; Burt and Estep 1981). However, more recent

writing seems to accept the notion of victimisation as a zero-sum proposition, whereby anything but outright resistance to *all* oppression constitutes guilt that diminishes one's own victim status (Garrison 2000, 161; Clegg 1999, 80; Chow 1999, 160).

Particular sensitivity occurs around the potential to objectify Third World women as helpless and unwitting victims of practices (arrogantly) considered barbaric by Western feminists. The objectification is seen to consist in neglecting to consider women's contribution to perpetuating these practices, which is presumed to render their victim status problematic. In her comparison of African female genital mutilation (FGM) to American labial cosmetic surgery, Simone Weil Davis (2002) protests against the Western habit of casting African women as 'undifferentiated victims' (27), on the basis that women participate in the shaping of the social framework that naturalises FGM (24). The 'differentiation' offered, however, really amounts to delineating the extent to which 'African women's relations to female genital operations are complex and variable' (22). This complexity apparently cannot accommodate a view (subjective or objective) of these women as victims alongside an understanding of their conscious agency in the practice, despite the fact that Davis appears ready to allow the conclusion she says is drawn by Somalian Soraya Mire – that consent merely signifies 'the degrading depths of women's oppression' (22). Obviously, Western imperial bias is not a contributing factor in Mire's appraisal of the custom as victimisation. Similarly, Blake (1994) attempts to give an account of Chinese foot-binding that renders it more than simply 'an example of female victimhood in the grip of patriarchy' (676). However, giving greater detail about the cultural and historical roots of the ritual and about women's active involvement in it, does not of itself demand that we reject considering this a victimizing practice, especially as it was intended to prepare young girls for the 'bodily insult[s]' that were '[their] fate in patriarchal society' (685).

Thus within the surveyed journals there is an overwhelmingly negative portrayal of victim status, and more particularly, of victimhood. Far from being a phenomenon confined to the aforementioned self-confessed feminists who overtly attack the contemporary movement, the dominant construction of the victim is repeatedly reproduced in more readily identifiable feminist theory. In many cases, this depiction is so taken for granted that this replication happens as incidental to the main arguments being made. The bad reputation of victimhood is now so normalised that unexamined assertions about the symbiosis of victimhood and passivity, the articulation of victim status as 'causing' victimhood, or victimhood's occlusion of forward progress now pass as uncontentious. Victimhood is taken to be a regressive state from which feminism has now emerged to a more enlightened stage, and emerge it had to, since seeing oneself as a victim forecloses the struggle against oppression (cf. D'Souza 1992, 243). In recognition of the constitutive effects of discourse and of the risk of creating victims by naming victims, alternative terms have been sought, especially in cases of rape, sexual abuse and domestic violence. The most common replacement term is that of 'survivor'.

Survivor discourse

Whilst being a 'victim' is seen to consolidate powerlessness and frustrate recovery, being a 'survivor' bespeaks an orientation towards active resistance and recuperation (Bahar 2003, 1025; Hengehold 2000, 189; McLeer 1998, 44; Lamb 1999, 119). Neither the

dichotomous division between victims and survivors, nor the positive effects of ‘choosing’ to ‘be’ a survivor rather than take on the role of victimhood, are very often openly challenged, exceptions being Goodey (2004, 34) and Bahar (2003, 1040)³. In Bahar’s case, however, non-specific citing of Martha Mahoney’s (1994) work as an example of feminist theory that uses survivor discourse to shift attention to women’s resistance in situations of oppression could be misleading (1025). Despite noting the contemporary preference for ‘survivor’, the thrust of Mahoney’s essay is rather the need to disentangle the cultural and legal link between victimisation and lack of agency (1994, 62, 64). In fact, she practices that disentanglement by using ‘victim’ exclusively throughout her essay even in focusing on the myriad ways women exercise agency whilst living with domestic violence.

It may be telling that Bahar associates that kind of theorizing only with the image of the survivor, and is symptomatic, I think, of a type of knee-jerk acceptance of the survivor’s exclusive claims to agency (though it must be said that Bahar does question the extent of the divide between victims and survivors later in her article, 1040). Even Sandra Walklate, coming from a victimological perspective that is premised by definition on the facticity of victimisation as a function of ‘structural location’ rather than defective mentality, does not contest the survivor/agency, victim/powerlessness paradigm, despite the fact that the survivors and victims in question are the same individuals (2003, 41). In that sense, the substitution of ‘survivor’ has not improved our understanding of the experience of victimisation (Gavey 1999, 78), and may have colluded with the backlash in denying the impact of oppression (Lamb 1999, 120). Indeed, the preference for ‘survivor’ is disturbingly consistent with what victimologist Robert Elias equates to social Darwinism – the tendency to value individualism and competitiveness, and associate victimisation with inadequacy (1985, 12-13). In keeping with Elias’ terms, if the ‘survivors’ are by definition the ‘fittest’, then the victims (non-survivors) should be by rights deselected, or at least be denied social support.

Even in postmodern feminist theorizing, there has been little willingness to unpack the assumptions that underpin the construction of the survivor/victim model. Ironically, a case in point is Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray’s 1993 article that deliberately sets out to examine the capacity of ‘survivor discourse’ to articulate subjective experiences, given that rendering experiences discursively immediately imbricates the speaker in existing power relationships and subjectivities, that will in turn be altered by the discourse. It emerges that the title is somewhat ambiguous. The ‘survivor discourse’ in question does not refer, as one might expect, to a discourse that uses ‘survivor’ rather than ‘victim’, but rather simply to the ‘discourse of survivors’ i.e. the increasing frequency of public disclosures by those who have suffered sexual assault. Alcoff and Gray question whether such disclosures really subvert patriarchy, or serve it in the process of its being appropriated and subsequently framed by ‘experts’ (261). What is striking about the article is the consistent and presumptive use of ‘survivor’ throughout, with ‘victim’ appearing much less, and only in contexts where it is set in opposition to

³ A reviewer of this paper drew attention to the fact that it was the women who experienced abuse who preferred the label ‘survivor’, and that feminist writers’ adoption of that term simply respects that choice (see also Lamb, 1999, 119). However, I think it is appropriate for feminist theorists (and entails no disrespect of ‘survivors’ experiences) to problematise the replacement of one term by another, and the factors that may have weighed on that choice.

‘perpetrator’ (265, 267, 273, 274), or associated with passivity or helplessness (262, 268, 281), diminishment and objectification (277), or reification (284). In other words, Alcoff and Gray’s article is inserting itself into a discursive context that has already constructed ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ in such a way that the latter cannot accommodate any of these connotations, and their own discourse does nothing to disrupt that. The role of the perpetrator becomes irrelevant in the accounts of survivors’ ‘heroic adaptation’, to borrow Lamb’s phrase (1999, 119); Alcoff and Gray have already defined a division between ‘passive victim’ and ‘active survivor’ (261-2); and prevailing assumptions could accept a ‘reified victim’ (284), but would see a ‘reified survivor’ as a contradiction in terms, even though ‘survival’ is always presented in as undifferentiated a form as ‘victimhood’. Despite their sensitivities to the potential for disclosures to participate in ‘discursive arenas’ that are potentially disadvantageous, the authors see no contradiction in drawing on a discursive context that has given a priori a positive valorisation to ‘survivor’ and denigrated ‘victim’. In so doing, they appear to have fallen into the very trap that they are warning should be avoided.

The preference for ‘survivor’ presumes that it is possible to construct women’s subjectivities in more beneficial ways through the terms used to describe them, but this neglects the ways in which the meanings of these terms are themselves constructed, and appears paradoxically to make essentialist assumptions about the inherent characteristics of victims as opposed to survivors. Thus it is assumed that victims are necessarily passive, helpless, irresponsible and inert. Survivors, on the other hand, are considered to actively resist being defined by their victimisation. However, as I have tried to show, these attributes are not given. If they were, survivors and victims would always be entirely distinct sets of individuals, which they evidently are not – the experience of being victimised is after all the thing that is being survived. As Mardorossian notes, the rejection of the ‘victim’ label ‘implies an acceptance and naturalisation of its meaning’ (2002, 789). These words are not neutral, and Alcoff and Gray’s choice of terminology is a loaded one, especially considering that this ‘naturalisation’ has been activated in discourses that did not originate within feminism. The task is to demystify the process by which certain labels come to be supported over others, and how vested interests may have contributed to that outcome.

Clearly, a dominant trend within feminist theory has been to incorporate certain assumptions about victims and victimhood to the extent that new ways of conceptualising women’s experience have had to be sought as alternatives to the now devalued victim. These assumptions are often embedded quite incidentally, and open engagement with the victim concept has been sporadic. However, I now want to turn to a new development in the representation of victimhood that constitutes an escalation in the anti-victim offensive.

Beware the ‘victim’

Earlier this year a book by John Hoffman and Paul Graham called *Introduction to Political Theory* (2006) was published. The book was written to be a political theory primer for undergraduate politics students. It also has a companion web site, with student and instructor areas, further study questions and links to other politics resources (xix). It contains special ‘How to Read’ sections, which ‘analyse key political texts and identify

core points' (xxv) – students are directed to pay particular attention to 'important' chapters of texts, but to skim others. Each chapter ends with a series of questions designed to test the student's understanding of the concepts discussed (xxv). In their introduction to the book, the authors promote the value of 'theory as abstraction' (xxxii), of grasping general concepts which will constitute a framework within which political events and debates can be understood (xxxii). In other words, students are presented with a pre-digested interpretation of core concepts that will supposedly form the baseline from which they can later go on to evaluate political practicalities. Chapter exercises reinforce what has been 'learnt'.

The book is divided broadly into two sections. The first deals with classical ideologies (liberalism, socialism, etc.) and ideas (democracy, citizenship, etc.); the second with contemporary ideologies (feminism, multiculturalism, etc.) and ideas (difference, terrorism). A chapter is devoted to each of these ideas/ideologies. The pertinence of the book to this paper is that it includes under the contemporary ideas category a chapter on 'victimhood' – that is, 'victimhood' is presented as a concept for which a definition can be offered, and whose key aspects can be encapsulated as part of a conceptual starter kit for novices. Moreover, the chapter includes a strong emphasis on feminist issues – two subsections deal exclusively with the question of women's victim status. The key textual source is Wendy Brown's *States of Injury* which is heavily drawn upon in these and other subsections to discuss victims and the state, and the second sentence of the chapter's abstract touches on the concept of 'victim feminism' (510). John Hoffman, the more senior of the co-authors, is also described as having published widely on feminism, amongst other things (xxix).

In essence, Hoffman and Graham present victimhood in an unfavourable light. Their view is not put forward as potentially contestable, but delivered in a series of categorical statements that mask normative judgments as accepted fact. We read that '[v]ictimhood is a pathology, [...] a negative situation that paralyses a person's capacity to act on his own behalf' (510); that there is a difference between being a victim and 'espousing' victimhood (510); that victimhood is the result of a 'mistaken view of power' (512); that Catharine MacKinnon's feminism implies a position that is 'utterly static', 'authoritarian', and in case the student readers were in any doubt about how they should react, elicits a feeling of entrapment as 'the most frequent response among students' (516). Whilst victims deserve compassion, those peddling victimhood clearly do not (512) – and peddled it is, for it is spread by 'proponents' (513) and the even more sinister 'purveyors' (513, 525). The assumptions we have seen promulgated through the literature so far are here openly stated with a tone of finality – the mentality of victimhood precludes agency and subjectivity (513, 516, 523, 524), blocks emancipation (516, 524), and is marked by delusion (512, 513, 516, 527), and moralizing self-righteousness (513, 516).

The glossary definition of 'victimhood' demonstrates the omniscience the authors apparently enjoy over the thought processes of these supposedly defective individuals. Victimhood is 'a belief, usually from victims, that their plight is caused by themselves or others who must be blamed and punished as a substitute for actively seeking the roots of their problem' (539). It is actually unlikely that victims would profess to be 'espousing' victimhood – that is a psychology ascribed to them by others, who often happen to be critical of their victim claims. Nor do the authors offer any advice in the case that

‘actively seeking the roots of [the] problem’ does produce the finding that ‘others’ are to blame. Whilst that conclusion would seem to prove an authentic case of victimisation, in the authors’ terms such a finding is exclusively the province of victimhood, which, let us not forget, has been defined as pathological. The premise of the chapter is that it is possible to be a victim without ‘espousing’ victimhood, but that achievement is here made to preclude attributing one’s problem either to oneself or others, in which case prospects of either identifying or finding a solution to actual victimisation seem extremely limited.

The problem not addressed by Hoffman and Graham is the process by which it is possible to distinguish ‘legitimate’ victims from the ‘purveyors of victimhood’. They take for granted that they have the necessary authority and objectivity to do this. In any case, it is clear that even those initially recognised as victims will have their claims delegitimised once they are judged to have become ‘victims of victimhood’ (522), a description that reconfigures their victim status as a function of their own oppressive psychology. Whilst it is necessary to see oneself as a victim ‘in order to embrace victimhood’ (513), victimhood is seen to be the product of certain beliefs in ‘a person who *may* be a victim’ (510; italics added). In other words, those who see themselves as victims are not necessarily the same group that is designated as such by others. Where self-belief does not match public acknowledgement, ‘victimhood’ is the culprit. That there might be forces that militate against having that self-belief validated, or that public perception is not necessarily superior to subjective experience, are possibilities that are not entertained by the authors. On the one hand, victims and the identity politics that represent them are said to be misguided about the existence of systemic oppression because of ‘a process of generalisation that distorts reality’ (513), whilst on the other, the authors are assumed to possess the uncontaminated cognitive powers necessary to determine which victims are mistaken about the ‘real cause’ of their suffering (527). Without exception, all such victims are by definition precipitated into victimhood.

Hoffman and Graham draw extensively on Wendy Brown’s *States of Injury* to support their analysis of victimhood, particularly in relation to the role of state ‘protection’ in reinforcing victimhood (515, 516, 518, 524). Resort to law is seen to encourage those (negative) characteristics associated with victimhood – lack of responsibility, passivity and powerlessness – and to foreclose the emancipatory possibilities of ‘[tackling] the problem in a meaningful way’ (524). The discussion of Brown’s ideas is fully referenced, and a ‘How to read’ box provides novices with a convenient entrée into the most important chapters of Brown’s book. Contrast this to the treatment of the work of ‘the radical feminist, MacKinnon’ (516) – unlike Brown, not endowed anywhere in this chapter with her first name (which in any case is misspelled throughout the rest of the book). MacKinnon’s work itself is not cited, nor does it appear in either the chapter reference list (528) or suggested further reading (529; Brown’s book on the other hand is recommended as ‘a real classic’). To be fair, the authors purport to be only conveying Brown’s views on MacKinnon, but the already noted anticipation of the expected student reaction to her work advertises their position from the outset (516). In case students think of examining Brown’s treatment of MacKinnon for themselves, in the ‘How to read’ hints they are specifically directed away from Chapter 4 where Brown does most of this analysis (518).

In the context of this dismissal of MacKinnon, it is intriguing that in an earlier article (1998), Hoffman gives a much more sympathetic view of MacKinnon's attempt to construct a feminist theory of the state. In fact, a large portion of the article is devoted to eliminating what Hoffman believes is a potential logical flaw in MacKinnon's argument – that there would be no need for a distinctively feminist theory of the state, unless the state were *intrinsically* patriarchal (162). He sets out to prove that the latter is the case, and in the course of his argument, his anti-statist position emerges definitively (174). Not only that, but he agrees with MacKinnon that 'male violence pervades patriarchal society as a whole' (166), which seems counter to the later book's criticism of victims who blame others for their problems. This sort of discrepancy may be a function of co-authorship, but it seems that anti-statism does inform the book's rejection of the state as a viable mechanism of self-actualisation. It is likely that students reading the book would not be familiar with the preconceptions the authors bring with them, especially as these preconceptions are not clearly stated, but presented as the authoritative view. Again, this view is supported by framing state intervention as infantilising 'protection' (516, 524). It is not explained why invoking legal redress does not qualify as an example of the 'appropriate intervention' that is able to be sought when victims seek 'to understand critically and rationally their plight' (523), nor how that particular outside intervention (whatever it might be) is less protective or disempowering than that provided by the state. The role of law in establishing moral standards and social expectations is ignored, along with the activism that is often required to obtain legal recognition of oppression. The impression given in the book is that such measures have dropped from the sky unbidden (513).

To illustrate that, but also to highlight some possibly unintentional effects of the pronominalisation chosen in this chapter, let me quote the following in full –

Hence victimhood paralyses agency in that it promotes a belief that victims are powerless to resist *their* oppressor in meaningful and realistic ways, or act in ways that might alleviate, if not eradicate, *their* symptoms. Victimhood, insofar as it espouses resistance, believes that salvation can only come from 'outside' – from a protector who will punish *their* tormentor, a benevolent spiritual force, or an external agency that rescues the victim who is unable to act on *her* own behalf. (513, italics added).

This passage occurs at the end of the first two pages of the chapter, by which time we have had presented to us the full panoply of victimhood's defects, and met the 'proponents' and 'purveyors'. Until this point, there appears to have been a studious avoidance of using singular pronouns – the authors speak instead of people, persons, or individuals who are conscious of 'their' victimisation. Then suddenly the singular *feminine* pronoun inserts itself. This is not to say that the feminine pronoun is not used elsewhere in the book (it is), but certainly in this chapter, whilst the singular is not used as much as the more indefinite plural, when it is, it is overwhelmingly the feminine, and precisely because of the comparative rarity of the singular, all the more noticeable. Admittedly, one could expect that Hoffman at least might prefer to use the feminine pronoun, since he has published work that it is reasonable to consider pro-feminist, and the choice of the feminine might well be a deliberate move towards equalisation. However, I venture to say that the use of the feminine singular pronoun in place of the masculine to refer to non-gender specific individuals is still not yet sufficiently

normalised for it not to be striking. It seems unfortunate, to say the least, that the first appearance of this usage in the chapter should be precisely at the moment when the proponents of victimhood are being represented as distressed damsels waiting to be rescued. The effect of such choices, though quite probably unintentional, is to give the impression that women are particularly prone to the ‘pathology’ of victimhood.

By analyzing this book chapter in some detail, I have attempted to highlight how Hoffman and Graham repeat the negative construction of victimhood that was promulgated by the discourse of ‘political correctness’, and incorporated perhaps unconsciously into feminist thinking. Victimhood is portrayed as being caused by and causing passivity, which appears to be intuited from lack of effective action or resolution, while it is never concluded that these might be a function of actual inability to resolve the problem because of the incapacitating effects of victimisation. Nor is the latter suggested as the reason for seeking outside intervention. That is instead attributed to a refusal to take responsibility for solving problems oneself, and is associated with moralizing self-righteousness and authoritarianism. If violence is perpetuated, it is the fault of those engaging in victimhood, not the original perpetrators, who are themselves now the victims of demands for redress. What is different about Hoffman and Graham’s chapter is that it represents an escalation of antagonism to victims that is not simply manifested by a more or less casual adoption of assumptions. Here the stigma of ‘victimhood’ is not simply alluded to or presumed in the process of conducting broader analyses – it is being taught.

Conclusion

The above survey of a range of feminist literature clearly reveals an anti-victim perspective. Space has precluded an examination of the few feminists who have actively contested this view (Cole 2000; Mardorossian 2002; McLeer 1998; Goodey 2004). In the light of the extent to which the surveyed literature seems to replicate wider anti-victim assumptions, often with great certainty as in the case of Hoffman and Graham’s book, it is reasonable to conclude that feminist contestation of victim-blaming discourse has been inadequate. As Atmore notes (1999, 92), the ‘delegitimation of the quasi-metanarrative’ has produced fluctuating and sometimes unpredictable discursive alignments, but for her this is not reason in itself to dismiss ideas that seem to intersect with those of opposing camps. This might be so if the discourses in question represented the pure, unadulterated rendition of ideas injected into an equally unadulterated discursive context, in which particular power relationships were not already at play. However, what facilitated the wide dissemination and acceptance of backlash rhetoric were the significant financial and institutional resources available to its proponents (see Messer-Davidow, 1993). These resources underwrote a concerted campaign to depoliticize both minority claims of victimization and the collusion of dominant groups in that oppression, representing self-identified victims as worthy of suspicion. Paradoxically, the claims by these groups of reverse victimization indicated their belief in the social and political capital that ensued from the validation of victim status, and might properly have engendered caution on the part of those encouraged to relinquish the victim label.

Rather than reject victim status on the basis of the critical light in which victims were cast by various discourses, feminists could have made more conscious attempts to disentangle the negative attributions of ‘victimhood’ from whatever might be considered

the necessary determinants of victim status. This would enable the reinstatement of the political process by which both victim status and the reality of the oppression that has caused it become legitimated. This process includes the validation of victims' subjective experience and the translation of that validation into socially agreed standards, which both facilitate subsequent recognition of 'victims' and accommodate a variety of victim subjectivities.

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