

Dangerous Victims: On Some Political Dangers of Vicarious Claims to Victimhood*

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Abstract

As we have seen in the cases of Serbia and Israel, collectives can be mobilised to perpetrate grave wrongs on the basis of patently ideological claims about the harms they have suffered. This article seeks a theoretical understanding of this troubling phenomenon. It does so, first, by contrasting mobilisation based on vicarious victimhood with revenge. The groups in question do not exhibit the contact with reality and clear sense of agency that are prerequisites for revenge. However, these evasions of agency and reality are not specific to group identities centred on victimhood. Second, therefore, the article considers the attractions of such an identity and how it reinforces groups' tendencies to myth-making and irresponsibility. Among its more harmful effects, it obscures the realities of state power and forecloses meaningful accountability to those outside the group. It also sets in train a vicious circle, whereby the group discovers perverse incentives to harm others – and to harm itself. Yet these harms only reinforce the group's self-anointed status as victim: as always done by, never doing to.

Keywords: Collective agency; collective responsibility; Israel; myth; nationalism; Serbia; victimhood.

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‘They will never beat you again’. – Slobodan Milosevic, to Kosovan Serbs (quoted by Ignatieff, 1998: 42)

‘Masada is no longer the historic mountain near the Dead Sea but a mobile mountain which we carry on our back anywhere we go’. – AB Yehoshua (quoted by Reicher and Hopkins, 2001: 143)

‘In the memory of oppression, oppression outlives itself. The scar does the work of the wound’. – Leon Wieseltier (1989: 20)

Introduction

This article offers some theoretical and philosophical reflections on a troubling political phenomenon. How is it that collectives can be mobilised to perpetrate grave wrongs based on a misplaced perception of their status as victims? Two examples may be especially striking: the Serb people during the Yugoslav and Kosovo wars; and the mobilisation of Israeli Jews in their occupation of the Palestinian territories. The cases have two things in common. First, the sheer gravity of the political and military harms committed against other peoples. One might say this gravity were indisputable, were it not for partisans’ shrill protestations that their group is an injured party, and not at all the author of violent harms and humiliations against others. Second, the claims to victimhood are patently ideological. That is to say, the groups have come to think of themselves as victims, but these claims are misplaced in several important ways. They relate to relatively distant historical events, or even to a historical fate. Generally they relate not to the speaker’s own suffering, but that of other group members or that of ‘the group’ *per se*. The most-invoked stories of who is perpetrating harms badly lack relevance and reality; they are liable to shift wildly between different groups and nations and the world in general.

This article is not about the dangers of victimhood, then, but rather the dangers of certain claims to victimhood. Although the group may have suffered (and may still suffer), the victimhood in question is primarily a *subjective* matter of the group’s self-perception – and self-presentation.¹ More, being perceived in groups, the victimhood is generally *vicarious*. To cast a critical eye on the political power of victimhood may seem like ‘blaming the victim.’ Likewise, it may seem to discount the legitimate role that protests at past injuries undoubtedly have in overcoming injustice and asserting

solidarity and self-respect. Nonetheless, claims to collective victimhood, like any other political claim on behalf of a group, should not be taken at face value. First, descriptions of groups in terms of simple moral categories are almost certainly *simplifications*. Second, these are cases of judging in one's own cause. Although such judgments may be justified in some cases, they are surely ideological in others. While a realistic judgment of harms suffered may be essential for future justice, a simplistic and self-righteous ideology of victimhood bodes ill for all parties.

My hypothesis, then, is that a dangerous political dynamic has been at work in the cases of Serbia and Israel – one that may have a wider resonance, too, for instance in US foreign policy following September 11.² To address this, the article begins (section 1) by noting some paradoxes involved in an ideology of victimhood and by contrasting it with the phenomenon of group revenge. Since revenge depends on relatively clear identifications of pertinent realities, the article argues that there are good reasons why we tend to see, not revenge, but rather the less straightforward phenomenon under discussion here. Section 2 discusses the first of these reasons, the difficulty groups have in sharing reasonably accurate narratives. Section 3 examines the second: the difficulties groups may have in constituting and acknowledging themselves as agents. However, neither difficulty is specific to group identities centred on victimhood. Section 4 argues that such identities have powerful attractions and strongly reinforce the tendencies of groups to myth-making and irresponsibility. Section 5 examines the perverse incentives that arise for a group to harm others, and itself, so that the victimised identity may in some respects even become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

1. Some Paradoxes of Vicarious Victimhood, and a Contrast with Revenge

If the pose of victimhood has sometimes proved attractive to political communities, it nonetheless seems puzzling, even paradoxical, in at least three ways. A first paradox: for a collectivity to mobilise around a sense of victimhood presupposes joint action, and not pure passivity. But victimhood – the experience of being harmed or humiliated – is to do with being done by, of being pacified, of being made to suffer others' ill-will against one's will. It is easy to see that this might provide for a first impulse to action, some form of *reaction* – recoil, resentment, revenge. But how can it provide for a lasting spur to action? Why should the humiliating memory of enforced passivity not be forgotten once the empowerment of collective action is felt?

Second: the mobilising power of victimhood comes into its own when the worst is over.³ This is especially clear in the case of Israel. For decades after the Second World War, rather little was said about the Holocaust, as it later came to be called. Israeli nationalism cultivated a tough, aggressive self-image, which disowned

previous experiences of victimhood. Hannah Arendt observed this at Adolf Eichmann's trial in 1961:

The contrast between Israeli heroism and the submissive meekness with which Jews went to their death... seemed a fine point, and the prosecutor, asking witness after witness, "Why did you not protest?" ... was elaborating it for all it was worth. But... the point was ill-taken, for no non-Jewish group or people had behaved differently. (1977a: 11)

Nonetheless, the psychology of the cruel attitude Arendt refers to is both familiar and understandable. So long as one feels the threat of such a fate, an obvious defence mechanism is to deny that one might also have succumbed. In previous decades it had been acceptable for Israelis to deny commonality with the victims, to deny that they too might have submitted to this fate. Only in the years following the Eichmann trial, as it became clear that Israel had attained sufficient military might to secure its existence against any likely or even conceivable threat, that the Holocaust took on its current centrality to Israeli identity. In other words – and perhaps this is not so surprising after all – it may be the privilege of the relatively secure to identify themselves *with* the victims. But that this should slide into an identification *as* victims seems paradoxical. Why should those who have triumphed over adversity loudly protest their victimhood?

And a third paradox, so familiar that we may no longer even feel puzzled by it at all. How can it be that those who identify with harms done to others should not be sensitised against perpetrating harm? But perhaps we already have a clue from the previous points. If we could trace mechanisms whereby the group does not see itself as active and responsible, then we have a first clue to how it can nonetheless perpetrate harms. By the same token, we would also see an attraction of the victim pose – of being the 'done by,' not the 'doing to.'

Some readers may find these points unpersuasive: revenge, after all, clearly combines victimhood, effective agency, and harm to others. Of course, I do not mean that we should be puzzled if someone who has been harmed (re)acts, or if he waits to do so until he is more secure, or if his reaction is to harm another. (Although I will be arguing that a group faces special difficulties in taking revenge.) What *is* perplexing is how a group may adopt the political pose of victimhood, when most of its members have no especial claim to have been victimised, and how it may find that pose persuasive even while it victimises others.

Narratives of victimhood and revenge are alike in that both begin with a moralised account of harms suffered. Something *wrong* has been done to me; someone else was *responsible* for this. What follows from this, emotionally and as matters of action or judgment, can obviously vary greatly. So long as it remains a question of one

(perceived) victim and one (alleged) perpetrator, there is no political question at stake. What gives the matter a political dynamic is when victimhood is experienced collectively. This way of thinking goes beyond the foundational moral principle that agents be identified with their actions and sufferings (*'he did that to me'*), to much more complex psychological and political identifications (*'they did this to us'*). But who are 'they'? Which collectivity, under what description, do we hold responsible for our being victimised? More immediately, who is 'we' meant to describe? Whose sufferings do I identify with, even when I have not been harmed in any obvious or direct way myself? – In other words: Complex processes of mutual identification are preconditions for a shared sense of victimhood. To take revenge, effective group agency is also essential.

One of my starting points here is the thought that revenge plays a surprisingly small role in the relations of large collectivities. (This claim will be less persuasive, the more loosely one defines revenge, a point I return to shortly.) Small groups – gangs or extended families, for instance – can obviously act vengefully and may become caught in 'cycles of violence' (cf. Walker, 2006) as a result. And of course, acts of revenge are certainly not unknown in war, nor are they unknown in the Yugoslav and Palestine-Israel conflicts, nor even in US foreign policy. (Think, for instance, of the expulsion of Serbs from Kosovo; cf. Judah, 2000: ch. 10.) Yet I think it can be argued that revenge rarely describes the interactions of large collectives very well.⁴ Considering that collective entities are not known for being especially forgiving – old hatreds can live on for very long periods, as can a sense that historic injustices have been perpetrated – this surely calls for explanation.

Since revenge is so often self-defeating in terms of material self-interest, one might argue that groups tend not to pursue revenge because it is rarely in their interests. Perhaps the leaders of groups (by definition, wielders of power) do not themselves feel the experience of victimhood deeply enough to thirst for revenge. At least the second of these arguments seems to capture an important truth and might be useful for explaining other cases. However, neither will explain the cases of dangerous, vicarious victimhood that I want to understand. The group's self-interest, on any reasonably objective construction, has not been served by an identity centred around victimhood, no more than it would be served by revenge for whatever actual harms are suffered. Moreover, revenge simply does not seem a reasonable description in my cases. Neither the Israelis nor the Serbs see the largest harms they have perpetrated as forms of revenge, be it the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims and Kosovan Albanians, or the on-going subjugation of Palestinians. Nor would it be plausible for on-lookers to interpret them as revenge, for the harms can hardly be seen as calculated paybacks (however badly calculated) against specific perpetrators.

An answer to the question, why revenge is uncommon as on-going motivation of large-groups, should therefore also provide some clues as to what may happen when a

sense of victimhood is incorporated into the identity of a group, but not discharged in the form of revenge. Of course, this claim partly depends on how one defines revenge. A looser definition might encompass all aggression accompanied by justificatory stories of wrongs that are somehow associated with the party now being attacked. I am supposing that the connections need to be somewhat clearer than this – the connections, that is, between perpetrator, harm inflicted, and action taken by the victim-cum-avenger that institutes an appropriate payback for that harm. Whether revenge is a dish best served hot or cold, it still needs to be served at the right person's cost and by the correct hand. The larger the group, and the longer the time-frame, the more unclear these connections must become. More than this, I take it that revenge is fairly clear as to the avenger's sense of agency. The perpetrator may have set the initial terms, as avengers often remind us ('He started it!'). But the vengeful person is determined not to accept the role of victim lying down: 'I will not remain a victim.' In this much, the avenging victim implicitly sees himself as equal to the perpetrator – morally superior, quite likely; factually denigrated, perhaps; but equally the author of his actions.

It has often been suggested that large groups may *regress*, that is, revert to modes of thinking and feeling that do not – in Freudian terms – honour the reality principle. Unless construed very loosely, revenge actually demands a fairly good grasp on reality – with regard to harms done and the identity of the perpetrator, and (perhaps even more important) to one's own role as an agent who sees oneself as seeking revenge and thereby *takes responsibility* for avenging the wrong. If this is correct, then the reason why large groups rarely pursue revenge is unlikely to have much to do with prudence. Whatever truth such explanations may have, more important is the fact that large groups face considerable obstacles in facing reality. It is this distance from actuality that we see at work when a group defines itself in terms of an enduring sense of victimhood: a mythical moralisation of the world that consistently displaces responsibility under the cover of being purely 'done by' and never 'doing to.'

The contrast with revenge therefore points our attention to two crucial evasions of reality that are caught up with the difficulties of shared identity, and which I discuss in the next two sections. The first is a fictional view of the world. We know that groups are better able than lone individuals to sustain such fictions. When individuals identify with others they are driven toward shared narratives of past and present; for better or worse, truth figures very low on the list of criteria for effective mobilising narratives. Second, revenge is relatively honest about its own agency, and is basically incompatible with the protestation that one is and remains a victim. The second evasion that I want to discuss, then, is how groups, much more easily than individuals, can act without a sense of responsibility. While revenge is meant to overcome victimhood,⁵ groups face serious difficulties in pursuing even this dubious tactic.

2. Making Groups by Making Myths

It is a commonplace of writing on nationalism and collective memory that groups are highly selective, and often downright mythical, in their shared stock of knowledge. As Renan wrote, 'Getting history wrong is a part of being a nation' (quoted by Hobsbawm, 1992: 12). All material factors notwithstanding, large groups depend for their existence on imagination, and this imagination ranges back and forth across time: from common past to common future. Histories and claims about shared traits and collective identity are deployed with one if not both eyes toward collective action. As Reicher and Hopkins put it:

The nation's history is always written from a perspective, it is always organised to construct a transhistorical "we" with timeless qualities that are to be realised in the speaker's political project... [Politicians'] ability to win support [is] contingent upon their successfully grounding their definition of the collective and the passionate attention given to the past reflect[s] this significance. (2001: 151)

If the group is to be coherent, then, there must be some shared stock of 'knowledge,' some way of making sense of what goes on in the world, that is always there to be alluded to, the background that everyone can be assumed to know. Yet how the group will proceed into the future is necessarily an open matter, and explicit claims about how this should go are bound to invite dissent (if not the suggestion that it might be better for sub-groups to go their separate ways).

The reason the past figures so largely in group identities, then, is because a concern with the future cannot be voiced as such without suggesting the group's identity is anything but given. All that *is* given, in fact, is the past. Yet the past has no certain messages either, being so vast and so variegated: unmanageable as an object of discourse, hopelessly splintered as an object of knowledge. Since the past is actually invoked in the name of the future, and since the past is so frustratingly complex and shapeless, the past must be remade. At the same time, insofar as the group's identity is contested and different visions of its future are in play, different remakings of the past are bound to circulate and compete. Even the meaning of particular events is far from given. For example, does Masada⁶ represent a defiant triumph, a symbol of eternal threat, or sacrilegious suicide by a few zealots? The very multivalence of history, even when potted down to a couple of focal events, is a source of its power to unite groups, since different members may read foundational events in different ways. At the same time, insofar as 'the' past is invoked to render the future more certain, this creates obvious incentives to suppress alternative interpretations.

This selectivity with the past is already problematic, for it poses related problems of *relevance* and *significance*. Which facts do we care about, which are of interest,

which bear on our current and future lives? Individuals' answers will naturally vary with their view of which groups they do or wish to belong to. Different sub-groups will naturally have interests in different truths, and stories that convey 'what matters' inevitably reflect internal power relations. Above all, different groups will obviously have differing senses as to what matters. We – or at least some of us – must live with the consequences of our defeat. But the defeat we inflicted on *them* may vanish from our view, or be masked under stories of desert. In other words, selectivity can involve blindness toward the fate of others, and obscure power dynamics within the group.

Furthermore, remakings of the past are not only selective but violently *fictive*. Since the past is remade for the sake of the future, it is neither driven nor constrained by the truth. The reshaping is driven by the (perceived) need to bind and to mobilise. It is constrained, therefore, not only by significance but also by *simplicity* and *credibility*. Yet commonsense tells us that simple (hi)stories are less likely to be true, just by virtue of making simple what is doomed to be complex. As Gertjan Dikjink observes:

Where nationalist sentiments prevail, the past is always important. It is the main source of arguments and frustration, however distorted and mythologised. There is basically no age limit to dates of possible significance and the frequent occurrence of events from the remote past in current political discourse is often surprising for people belonging to nations that derive their identity from seventeenth- or eighteenth-century trade capitalism or the nineteenth-century wave of nationalism. The person who experiences five centuries of Turkish suppression as a gap in national history rapidly ends up in medieval Great Serbia. On Kosovo Day (28 June), the Serbs traditionally commemorate the fall of the Serbian empire at the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 and the start of centuries of Turkish rule. (1996: 112)

In a process of mythicisation, historical experiences are transformed 'into traditions... as the many stories of the many generations are made into the single story of the struggle to survive, and are sanctified' (Wieseltier, 1989: 20). The events join an eternal present, are transfigured 'into unchanging and unchangeable substances' (Connerton, 1989: 42). Such stories – myths of chosenness, persecution, world-historical destiny – are even more exclusive and exclusionary than a selective account of the past. Driven by anxiety regarding collective identity, making sense of the world in mythicised, moralised simplifications, they are liable to amuse or baffle outsiders, or even elicit their contempt. – Greater realism, then, whether in the direction of less self-centred selectivity or greater accuracy, always has a price. It inevitably disrupts the significance of the group's "chosen traumas" and "chosen glories" (Volkan, 1997: chs. 3-5), and risks revealing their different significance to different members of the group.

All this is familiar territory for scholars of nationalism and ethnicity. People take their reference point for their beliefs from those around them. Therefore groups can sustain stories that otherwise seem utterly insane, that have no contact with the truth, and no relation to the present except in the symbolic terms of a similarly incredible world-historical narrative. George Orwell once claimed, ‘One prod to the nerve of nationalism, and the intellectual decencies can vanish, the past can be altered, and the plainest facts can be denied’ (1965: 176). Others have argued, nonetheless, that there need be nothing terribly harmful in such myths. People must discover some sort of solidarity, after all, if there is to be any such thing as meaningful collective agency. For the same reason, a group must make sense of its place in the world. The unarranged, numberless facts of history are no use for either.⁷

However this may be, three general and perennial problems of group myth-making are essential to my topic. One is that such myths, precisely by virtue of their constructive role in suggesting unity, can obscure power differentials within the group and can inhibit or disable internal critique. Second, myths provide frameworks for interpreting current events, and are therefore prone to distort perceptions and hinder appropriate responses. (An early example from the Zionist experience: one Zionist saw the first anti-Jewish riots in Jaffa, in 1908, as an ‘anti-Semitic pogrom,’ ‘reminiscent in all its details’ to the outbursts he had experienced in his native Russia.⁸ Yet Arab opposition to Jewish settlement had quite different causes; blindness to this was one large cause of the failure to find an effective accommodation between Arabs and Jews.) Third, the selectivity and untruth of such myths, and the blinkers they create, impede communication with other groups. As well as disallowing a shared factual background, myths tend to embody stereotypes and expectations of other groups, or even the whole external world. In both ways, they obstruct communication and interaction. – These familiar problems are obviously relevant to the myths of victimhood that concern us here. So: the *whole* group as victim; every event interpreted as evidence of familiar hostility; outsiders perpetually seen as persecutors, at any rate in terms of the simple dichotomy: ‘either for or against us.’

3. Problems of Group Agency and Responsibility

I now turn to another sort of denial to which groups are susceptible: the denial of agency and responsibility. One of the basic facts of group action is that it faces coordination problems that undermine responsibility. In speaking of ‘responsibility,’ I want to emphasise the following elements: Activity that responds to reality; Activity that manifests consistency and a sense of accountability for previous acts; Activity that responds to shared – or at least intelligible – norms.

It is obvious that an individual person may fail to be responsible on all these counts. Sometimes we describe these as failures of morality, sometimes we think of them as mental pathologies. However, collective agents are more likely to fail, because they are inevitably less coherent than individuals. (Hence the persuasiveness of attributing to groups the mental pathologies of dissociation, such as projection, paranoia, narcissism and so forth.) So far as groups engage in myth-making, they obviously cannot respond to reality with all due prudence, let alone concern for others. Likewise, it is easy to see that consistency, accountability, and moral rationality pose huge problems for groups.

The problem begins with the splintering of action and knowledge inherent in the situation of a large group. It requires some effort for an individual person not to let one hand see what the other does; this is much easier for a collectivity. The majority need see nothing as its army's 'special units' run through villages marking houses for ethnic cleansing, or as soldiers inflict humiliation in occupied territories. Under some political circumstances this may be a matter of not 'wanting to see,' of motivated blindness; in others it may be that disorganisation or failures of the media prevent knowledge; in still others some governmental or military functions may be conducted in secrecy. In each case there may be penalties for 'knowing in public,' that is, for speaking about what is done. For a public to have a shared, realistic, self-critical understanding of 'its' actions – in large part, the actions of its governmental and military bodies – requires an extensive fabric of rights and guaranteeing institutions, clearly absent during the splintering of Yugoslavia. Even where present, those bodies may face largely inwards, as we see in the case of Israel, and thus have considerable difficulty in compassing external perspectives.

Just as groups are able to tell one another stories, solidifying beliefs that would otherwise be incredible, so too they are able to reinforce moral self-identities that suggest there is no meaningful prospect of outside accountability, or even communication. Group members are sure to encounter much evidence of misunderstanding. If the left hand is indeed hidden from the right, to hold the group to account for the left hand's activities is bound to seem misplaced to many. Where accountability fails, responsibility across time is all too likely to fail. Did we *really* do that? Psychologists have observed how bullies 'discount' their actions (there's no problem, it's not as bad as all that, there's no possible change that would solve things...). Groups don't need to know that there's a problem or how bad it is. And change is likely to appear impossible: after all, huge coordination achievements are involved in changing a group's institutions and its patterns of communication and activity.

Finally, if a group's activity is badly fragmented and evades reality, it will be difficult to trace intelligible norms in its actions. I have already mentioned the principle of revenge – a norm of sorts. If we avenge such and such injuries, then the reality of our

power – of state and military power – is nakedly exposed. So too is the possibility that we might have acted otherwise, for instance, that we might have acted more magnanimously or more accountably. But if what ‘we’ are doing is not known by most, if the actions of some are not coordinated with the actions of others, if we do not decide together how to act together – then the resulting plurality of responses will lack a single rationale, will not have been weighed against alternatives, will not make manifest the group’s collective power to all its members.

To summarise the contentions of this and the previous section: Groups tend to be held together by more or less mythical accounts of their history and activity. They face enormous difficulties in organising and recognising their own agency. Both problems clearly inhibit revenge. More broadly and more worryingly, both problems undercut a shared sense of responsibility, and accountability in terms of norms shared with other groups.

4. The Attractions of Victimhood

Despite the apparent lack of dignity involved in the pose of victimhood, such a stance has some readily understandable attractions. Moreover, the attractions of collective stories based on victimhood have an all too natural ‘fit’ with these difficulties groups have in facing reality and in acting responsibly.

These attractions partly overlap with the incentives felt by individuals. Alain Finkielkraut once wrote, of being born Jewish after the demise of Nazi Germany:

I inherited a suffering to which I had not been subjected, for without having to endure oppression, the identity of the victim was mine. I could savour an exceptional destiny while remaining completely at ease. Without exposure to real danger, I had heroic stature: to be a Jew was enough to escape the anonymity of an identity indistinguishable from others and the dullness of an uneventful life. (1994: 7, as quoted by Maechler, 2001: 60)

Vicarious victimhood, in other words, brings tragic dimensions to an ordinary existence, without the actual costs. Groups too face an incentive to self-dramatise, to discover a destiny, in their search for shared narratives. To survive in the teeth of fate adds an element of heroism that the pose of victimhood otherwise painfully lacks. At the same time as losses and humiliations are dwelt on, they are also rendered meaningful, even redeemed, by being linked with the destiny of the group. To the extent that victimhood is vicarious, moreover, the shaming nerve of humiliation has not been touched: neither individual nor group need really experience what it means to *suffer*, in its most abstract and humiliating sense: to be subject to the will of another.

More than this, there are strategic benefits to presenting oneself as a victim – though again, rather demeaning ones. We have all been careful, at one time or another, to present ourselves as the injured party. Discourses of victimhood, if accepted by others, mean that they approach the victim – or victim-group – with bad conscience, with the discomfiting feeling that something is owed. This uncertain ‘something’ could be anything from recognition to recompense, from revenge to some sort of ‘moral tax break’ – for instance, an exemption from otherwise legitimate criticism of the group’s actions. It is part of the power of victimhood that it unsettles the well-intentioned bystander, whose responsibilities are nonetheless far from clear – perhaps only some generalised, unspecific duty to help see that things are made good, so far as that may be possible. A skilled pose of victimhood, indeed, may insinuate that this is not possible. At any rate, it leaves others tip-toeing on egg-shells, always trying to avoid offence and make amends, doomed never to succeed.

At the same time, the shared experience of harms or threats has always been a source of solidarity. Thus Herzl once wrote, ‘our enemies have made us one without our consent... Distress brings us together, and, thus united, we suddenly discover our strength’ (cited by Finlay, 2005: 212). This well-known source of group power is, of course, often essential to defending group interests and redressing injustice. No doubt, too, that it can be summoned even where the sources of ‘distress’ are more or less fictive. At the same time, however, this solidarity is readily undercut by a sinister dynamic. I have been emphasising one obvious way in which groups are less cohesive than individuals: that there are power differentials between their members. One obvious result of these, in turn, is that weaker members may suffer for the sake of the powerful. Skilled ‘entrepreneurs of identity’ (Hopkins and Reicher) – or more bluntly, leaders well-versed in the arts of group manipulation, such as Milosevic – can cynically exploit myths of suffering. Worse, they may find it all too convenient to see those myths reinforced by actual harms that really do create victims. The audience might be external, to convince the world that the group’s grievances are genuine. More likely the audience is internal, to convince one’s people that they are indeed victims or potential victims, with all that follows from this – above all, the need to unite in the face of the enemy and under the shelter of strong leadership. Leaders can enjoy the wounds at no personal cost, and use those wounds to reinforce their positions of power. Thus leaders have clear incentives to ensure that their peoples do indeed suffer, perhaps even to prefer continued external aggression. (And how better to secure this, than by violent provocation of the outside world?)

These are motivations to evade the facts, or in the latter case, one might say, to create the facts. At the same time, the pose of victimhood provides an especially powerful way of evading agency and responsibility. Again, the critical move begins with narratives of shared identity. Just as group members can (re)assure each other concerning a fictional view of events, so too they can support each other in a moral self-identity in the teeth of all realities. Members of the group identify themselves

with and as victims: *done by*, not *doing to*. To the extent that the group does act, this becomes a matter of *reaction*, imposed by external hostility. Social psychologists speak of the fundamental attribution error, when another person's acts are one-sidedly understood in terms of his intentions rather than his situation. Our actions, however, are simply responses. This error, common in all walks of life, has a rather pathetic, self-abasing aspect. As Deborah Tannen expresses it: 'We all tend to think of ourselves as reacting to others and others' behaviour as absolute' (1998: 73). Psychoanalysts, relatedly, speak of *projection*. Since the moral gulf between the groups exists primarily in the mind, it is all too easy for the victim-group to *project* aspects of its own thought and behaviour onto the other – those aspects incompatible with being purely *done by*, activity and hostility alike. In both cases, continual persecution converts the harms one perpetrates into self-defence; the group labours under the yoke of necessity or even historical destiny. One's own acts are attributed to the other: no responsibility need or can be taken.

The group thus discovers a language of self-exoneration; for any inconvenience or woe, a perpetrator stands already identified. The perpetrator can even inflict *moral* harms. We 'shoot through tears,' distraught at what we have to do to defend our compatriots. (Less fancily: 'look what they made us do.')

We remain victims, even as we act, by virtue of our noble identification with those who are victims and by virtue of regrets unknown (so the story goes) to those who oppose us. That our hands have been dirtied becomes further evidence of the wrongs that are being done to us ('look what they have made us into'). Their suffering, our suffering, their brutality, our brutality – all of it their responsibility. The pose of victimhood creates its own circular logic, one that undercuts the very idea of group agency.

So encircled, the idea of accountability no longer has any sense. Daniel Bar-Tal discusses this in terms of a 'siege mentality,' 'the tragic perception that the society is alone in a hostile world' (2000: 101; cf. Ignatieff, 1998: 60; Buruma, 1999: 9). The world is defined in simple, manageable terms, which shed clear light on situations. In the case of vicarious victimhood, it has this pernicious result: 'The hostile world cannot serve as a positive reference group and, therefore, no longer constitutes a binding moral authority for the society' (Bar-Tal, 2000: 114). If a group expects ill-will from another group, any accusation can only appear as a further offensive move. If the whole world is against you, it is plainly nonsensical to abide by international norms. These are the attractions of self-righteousness, of absolution in advance, of power without responsibility, of independence and autarchy. A self-exculpating narrative reassures less self-assured group-members and glorifies those who act under this necessity.

5. The Dangers of the Pose of Victimhood

These vicarious victims are dangerous because they buy into a dishonest story – falsely inflating others into sheerly ill-willed perpetrators, falsely reading themselves as innocent and non-responsible, always *done by*, never *doing to*. Though comforting and not without its uses, this dishonesty promises grave costs. It deforms ideas of what is in the group’s interests and obscures the very different interests of different group members. It transforms dissenters from this pose of victimhood into traitors, who must be discredited or marginalized. It removes the possibility of reasoned engagement with ‘perpetrators.’ And it creates motives to harm, at the same time as it prevents the ‘victims’ from recognising their own activities and the situation of those they are harming.

We have seen that an ideology of victimhood may have an especial, cynical attraction for leaders, as a rationale for on-going militarism, creating imperatives for group unity under their leadership and for the suppression of dissent. Neither is it without its attractions to the flock. A group may even welcome further harms, as evidence (to self, to doubting group members, to onlookers) of the truth of its narratives, identity, worldview. That is, we may fear that self-professed victims are all too liable to relive the very injuries against themselves that they officially protest – not only in imagination but also in deed. Not only will they be ever-so-sensitive to any possible slight, finding dark satisfaction each time their view of the world and their place within it has been confirmed. Worse, they may find ways to incite the harms that have come to define the group: not just imagining perpetrators but even creating them where before there was perhaps a merely neutral party. In other words, vicarious victims find themselves needing perpetrators, not just once but over and again. They will be dangerous, therefore, inasmuch as they may act to ensure those repetitions, soliciting aggression or even using violence that will provoke it.

This bleak thought is partly inspired by Wendy Brown’s reflections on the more troubling aspects of identity politics. When victimhood becomes central to an identity, both group and members *invest*, as she puts it, in their own subjection. That is, they fail to envisage a future for the group where the same harms and humiliations are not continually being perpetrated. No harm or humiliation will be forgotten, for ‘I am one of those who suffers at the hands of them.’ Nothing counts as evidence of one’s own empowerment, since one is forever a victim, always under threat, always misunderstood. Continually demanding recognition of one’s injury creates an imperative to relive the suffering and to produce tokens of that injury. ‘The past cannot be redeemed *unless* that identity ceases to be invested in it, and it cannot cease to be invested in it without giving up its identity as such’ (Brown, 1995: 73).

If identity is premised on victimhood and group belonging cemented by external threat, both of these are liable to be imperilled by reconciliation with the persecutor.

Thus conciliatory moves by the persecutor take on the shade of an existential threat. If *I am* the person (member of the group) that is threatened by him (them), then I am in danger of being left without bearings when my perpetrator withdraws from the fray. The stories I tell myself, the stories we tell one another, threaten to lose their sense-making power.

This is not just a problem for relations with outsiders. The group – or its leaders – needs to marginalize all who deny the official story, leading to intolerance, demands for conformity, and the failure of self-critique (cf. Bar-Tal, 2000; Finlay, 2007). Discussing the power of lies in politics, Hannah Arendt wrote:

a whole group of people, and even whole nations, may take their bearings from a web of deceptions to which their leader wished to subject their opponents. / What then happens follows almost automatically. The main effort of both the deceived group and the deceivers themselves is likely to be directed toward keeping the propaganda image intact... Contemporary history is full of instances in which tellers of factual truth were felt to be more dangerous, and even more hostile, than the real opponents. (1977b: 255)

It is easy to see why this should be, when the deceptions involved are those of a partly specious victimhood. The threat anchors group solidarity, and thus demands fidelity. Not to recognise past injuries and future threats is to undermine the group, to side with the enemy. Dissenters become ‘self-haters’ (Finlay, 2005): naïve, disloyal, even traitors.

But if the effects within the victim groups are unpleasant, the external effects are still more grave. Maintaining this self-identity as victim obviously requires belief in the immorality of the perpetrators. The gulf in perspectives between the groups become more and more unbridgeable, the more that moralised group identities are taken to define the facts. Along with the loss of self-critique, this demonisation of the other violently removes the possibility of real communication between the groups. Michael Ignatieff frames this in terms of yet another psychological category, the ‘narcissism of minor difference.’ One sees the other only in order to confirm difference, blinded to areas of commonality, narcissistically attached to one’s own virtue. Needless to say, such investment in intolerance makes a group immune to rational argument and, one might add, to reality itself. ‘What is denied is the possibility of empathy: that human understanding is capable of penetrating the bell jars of separate identities’ (1998: 60; cf. also Buruma, 1999).

Not least, victims become blinded with regard to possibilities for the future – with its Janus-faced promise of new opportunities and different threats. On the one hand, possibilities for action seem to be constrained by previous defeats and injuries, which speak against compromise or concession. (‘We’ve already suffered enough: no one

can ask more of us.’) On the other, the world is seen in familiar terms: foreseeing the same dangers; seeing no neutral parties, only supporters and enemies; refusing to face responsibility for the group’s coexistence with other groups. In all these ways, vicarious victims are dangerous because they cannot conceive a different future, because they will not take responsibility for helping to create a different future.

One of the paradoxes with which I began was how groups might find a source of agency in imagining themselves as always done by, never doing to. I hope to have shown that there *is* a source of agency here, but it is agency that denies itself over and again: self-sustaining and pernicious, a serpent eating its own tail. We fashion the future to conform to the myths of the past – to our own cost, and to the cost of others.

Conclusion

Why might a pose of victimhood attract groups, though it prove costly to themselves and others? If harms have been done, why not the less demeaning, more empowering category of revenge – or some other possibility again, such as the demand for justice or the quest for reconciliation? I have suggested that not only does revenge – or for that matter, any of the more palatable alternatives – require a clearer view of reality than we often find in collective memories and myths. More than this, it involves *self*-acknowledgement of one’s agency. For any group, collective agency represents a considerable achievement; so too, for a group to bear the responsibility and accountability to others that agency entails. Where groups lack this, and where the harms suffered are distant or fictive, something more diffuse than revenge arises. A shared identity of victimhood elides the perhaps formidable capacities that some of the group’s organisations or sub-groups can marshal, covers over power differentials within the group, demands the firm hand of leadership while obscuring or discounting the group’s own actions. Knowledge and action part company.

When a self-identified victim meets a situation in which he can act with impunity, this is simultaneously a situation which his self-identity disqualifies him from recognising. One is always the punished, never the punisher; so impunity is inconceivable. Anyone who contradicts this story must be engaged in persecution or betrayal. Thus dissent has always attracted charges of disloyalty and treachery in groups that perceive themselves to be under threat. As to those who challenge from the outside: this is another feint by an enemy whose hostility creates the need for the victim to defend and protect himself; or it is more evidence of incomprehension on the part of outsiders who fail, yet again, to sympathise with the victim. The resentful, accusatory pose of vicarious victims secures group belonging at the price of denying group responsibility, at the price of suspicion and paranoia that banish the audibility and credibility of other accounts, at the price of meaningful accountability in a shared world.

Insofar as these reflections, set in train by two particular outbursts of modern nationalism – not to mention some aspects of American politics since September 11 – have any validity, it is natural to wonder whether any general lessons might be drawn. Negatively speaking, I should rule out one lesson that might be looked for, concerning the general place of groups who have been victimised and seek to remedy past injustices. My reflections have nothing to say at this level, since I have only reflected on some patently ideological uses of victimhood. Many other uses will have more integrity. Nothing said here is meant to cast doubt on the validity of appeals to past suffering, let alone to impugn victimhood in general as a dangerous force in politics. Rather, I hope to have shown three things, all rather less moralistic in their implications.⁹

First, even if my scepticism about revenge among large collective entities does not convince, I hope the reader will agree that we should pause before ascribing the interactions of groups to this dynamic. Many discussions proceed as if violence between groups can be understood as moments of spiralling or cyclical revenge. We may then assume that the alternative to revenge or resentment is – as it may be in personal relations – forgiveness, leading to a familiar set of moral pieties. (Worse, to pieties that denigrate the legitimacy of resentment at harms suffered.¹⁰) The reality is unlikely to be so simple, because of a second general argument that I have pursued. As all discussions of collective responsibility acknowledge, group agency is a difficult matter – indeed, a demanding and often fragile achievement. The essential plurality of a group can sometimes enable it to act self-critically and responsibly. More often, one fears, it enables groups to disown some of their members' deeds and to maintain insular fictions – not least, fictions that vilify other groups and obscure internal relations of power, privilege and impunity. Using categories familiar to us from individual agency or interpersonal relations can no doubt be helpful to political understanding (cf. Scheff, 1994; Volkan, 1997). But it demands great caution, not least because it so closely echoes the often manipulative invocations of group identity by politicians. A third point, and one I have dwelt less on, may bear on some of the simpler uses of rational choice theory in international relations. If we were not already convinced, I think this account demonstrates structural difficulties with 'self-interest' as a category of political analysis. Mobilisation around these ideological, tragi-historic claims to victimhood has proved good for no-one, except perhaps a handful of political entrepreneurs who make their unpleasant careers out of it. A whole series of perverse incentives sees to it that a group's own interests are damaged over and again: the ideological claim to victimhood generates violent political dynamics that ensure it retains some measure of reality. What is created is a particular sense of self that identifies with the harms done to it. Tragically, group members find self-satisfaction in harms done to those with whom they identify.

If one wanted a moral lesson, however, it might follow from this third point. Neither the chastening force of self-interest, nor the moral categories invoked when we

deplore the harms done to victims, can really be heard by a group that has (been) mobilised in this way. The pose of victimhood, and the accompanying projection of hostile agency onto others, distort the group's sense of self and its sense of morality, so that both point in the same direction: toward participation or complicity in harms against others, that isolate the group and foster enmity toward it. For this the only remedies are plain common sense and old-fashioned moral universalism – that is, the abilities to face up to the group's actions and their consequences for both self and other alike. The bitter irony is that these are precisely the resources that vanish when a group prejudices its cause and fails to take responsibility for its actions.

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¹ For a related discussion see Buruma (1999), on victimhood as a mark of identity. His concern, however, is not so much with conflicts in which this phenomenon plays a role, as with the wider dangers to truth, impartiality and communication that it poses.

² Thus Robert Meister's warning, for example: 'When great powers seek to justify their large-scale actions through the politics of victimhood, the moral lesson of the twentieth century is that we should all be afraid' (2002: 108).

³ Michael Ignatieff observed of Quebec that defeat was mythologised at just that moment it was overcome (1993: 116). That is, it was only when Quebec fully overcame long-standing economic disadvantage that the Quebecois started to identify themselves as marginalised in Canada. No longer united in the struggle to survive, a group must find another source of collective agency, if it is not to dissolve into the melting pot; the memory of trauma is well-suited to this purpose. Novick (1999) argues a similar case with regard to the centrality of the Holocaust in North American Jewry's self-identification, also a fairly recent phenomenon.

- ⁴ While admiring Scheff, 1994, I do (therefore) take issue with the ease with which he passes from interpersonal interactions to international ones. For instance, one of his central cases is Hitler's appeal to the Germans; but only a small part of Nazi violence can really be thought of as revenge.
- ⁵ I thank Myfanwy Williams for this formulation.
- ⁶ A formerly obscure event in Jewish history, recorded by only a single ancient writer, Josephus (*The Jewish war*, various editions: book VII, chs. 8 and 9), where the Jewish soldiers of the Masada fortress slaughtered their women and children and then themselves, rather than surrender to the Romans. In the Serbian context, a similarly resonant myth concerns Tsar Lazar who, in 1389 on what is now 'Kosovo day,' chose to fight to the death rather than surrender to the Turks.
- ⁷ Cf Archard, 1995. For a mediating position see Brunner, 1997. Brunner sees all the satisfactions gained by 'narrating the nation' as basically narcissistic. However, he follows Kohut in seeing narcissism itself as not pathological, indeed in some form as an essential source of agency via self-esteem. Nonetheless: 'Narratives of the nation are more pathological if they (a) entail a narrow and rigid closing off of one's own collective self toward others, while stressing the unbridgeable differences between the two, (b) invoke an essentialist collective self-image of moral and ethnic purity and of historical uniqueness, and (c) require the narrative degradation, exclusion or demonisation of others' (1997: 293).
- ⁸ The figure is Ben Zvi, as discussed by Elon, 1973: 172.
- ⁹ I thank an anonymous referee for this journal for helping me to see the first two points in these terms.
- ¹⁰ For protests against this tendency, see the recent special issue of the *Journal of Human Rights*, especially Brudholm (2006), Vetlesen (2006) and Walker (2006). Brudholm and Vetlesen emphasise the legitimate role that resentment may play; as emphasised above, this is not something I mean to deny.