

The Real Victims of Victimhood



By Arthur C. Brooks

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BACK in 1993, the misanthropic art critic Robert Hughes published a grumpy, entertaining book called “Culture of Complaint,” in which he predicted that America was doomed to become increasingly an “infantilized culture” of victimhood. It was a rant against what he saw as a grievance industry appearing all across the political spectrum.

I enjoyed the book, but as a lifelong optimist about America, was unpersuaded by Mr. Hughes’s argument. I dismissed it as just another apocalyptic prediction about our culture.

Unfortunately, the intervening two decades have made Mr. Hughes look prophetic and me look naïve.

“Victimhood culture” has now been identified as a widening phenomenon by mainstream sociologists. And it is impossible to miss the obvious examples all around us. We can laugh off some of them, for example, the argument that the design of a Starbucks cup is evidence of a secularist war on Christmas. Others, however, are more ominous.

On campuses, activists interpret ordinary interactions as “microaggressions” and set up “safe spaces” to protect students from certain forms of speech. And presidential candidates on both the left and the right routinely motivate supporters by declaring that they are under attack by immigrants or wealthy people.

So who cares if we are becoming a culture of victimhood? We all should. To begin with, victimhood makes it more and more difficult for us to resolve political and social conflicts. The culture feeds a mentality that crowds out a necessary give and take — the very concept of good-faith disagreement — turning every policy difference into a pitched battle between good (us) and evil (them).

Consider a 2014 study in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, which examined why opposing groups, including Democrats and Republicans, found compromise so difficult. The researchers concluded that there was a widespread political “motive attribution asymmetry,” in which both sides attributed their own group’s aggressive behavior to love, but the opposite side’s to hatred. Today, millions of Americans believe that their side is basically benevolent while the other side is evil and out to get them.

Second, victimhood culture makes for worse citizens — people who are less helpful, more entitled, and more selfish. In 2010, four social psychologists from Stanford University published an article titled “Victim Entitlement to Behave Selfishly” in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology. The researchers randomly assigned 104 human subjects to two groups.

Members of one group were prompted to write a short essay about a time when they felt bored; the other to write about “a time when your life seemed unfair. Perhaps you felt wronged or slighted by someone.” After writing the essay, the participants were interviewed and asked if they wanted to help the scholars in a simple, easy task.

The results were stark. Those who wrote the essays about being wronged were 26 percent less likely to help the researchers, and were rated by the researchers as feeling 13 percent more entitled.

In a separate experiment, the researchers found that members of the unfairness group were 11 percent more likely to express selfish attitudes. In a comical and telling aside, the researchers noted that the victims were more likely than the nonvictims to leave trash behind on the desks and to steal the experimenters’ pens.

Does this mean that we should reject all claims that people are victims? Of course not. Some people are indeed victims in America — of crime, discrimination or deprivation. They deserve our empathy and require justice.

The problem is that the line is fuzzy between fighting for victimized people and promoting a victimhood culture. Where does the former stop and the latter start? I offer two signposts for your consideration.

First, look at the role of free speech in the debate. Victims and their advocates always rely on free speech and open dialogue to articulate unpopular truths. They rely on free speech to assert their right to speak. Victimhood culture, by contrast, generally seeks to restrict expression in order to protect the sensibilities of its advocates. Victimhood claims the right to say who is and is not allowed to speak.

What about speech that endangers others? Fair-minded people can discriminate between expression that puts people at risk and that which merely rubs some the wrong way. Speaking up for the powerless is often “offensive” to conventional ears.

Second, look at a movement’s leadership. The fight for victims is led by aspirational leaders who challenge us to cultivate higher values. They insist that everyone is capable of — and has a right to — earned success. They articulate visions of human dignity. But the organizations and people who ascend in a victimhood culture are very different. Some set themselves up as saviors; others focus on a common enemy. In all cases, they treat people less as individuals and more as aggrieved masses.

Robert Hughes turned out to be pretty accurate in his vision, I’m afraid. It is still in our hands to prove him wrong, however, and cultivate a nation of strong individuals motivated by hope and opportunity, not one dominated by victimhood. But we have a long way to go. Until then, I suggest keeping a close eye on your pen.