

VICTIMHOOD

In fascist politics, the opposing notions of equality and discrimination get mixed up with each other. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 made the newly emancipated black Americans of the South into U.S. citizens and protected their civil rights. It was passed by the Senate and the House on March 14, 1866. Later that month, President Andrew Johnson vetoed the Civil Rights Act, on the grounds that "this law establishes for the security of the colored race safeguards which go infinitely beyond any that the General Government have ever provided for the white race." As W.E.B. Du Bois notes, Johnson perceived minimal safeguards at the start of a path toward future black equality as "discrimination against the white race."¹

Today, white Americans wildly overestimate the extent of U.S. progress toward racial equality over the past fifty years. Economic inequality between black and white Americans is roughly at the point it was during Recon-

struction; for every \$100 the average white family has accumulated, the average black family has just \$5; and yet, as Jennifer Richeson, Michael Kraus, and Julian Rucker have shown in their 2017 paper, “Americans Misperceive Racial Economic Equality,” white American citizens are widely ignorant of this fact, believing that racial economic inequality has dramatically narrowed.² Forty-five percent of President Donald Trump’s supporters believe that whites are the most discriminated-against racial group in America; 54 percent of Trump’s supporters believe that Christians are the most persecuted religious group in America. There is a crucial distinction, of course, between feelings of resentment and oppression and genuine inequality and discrimination.

There is a long history of social psychological research about the fact that increased representation of members of traditional minority groups is experienced by dominant groups as threatening in various ways.³ More recently, a growing body of social psychological evidence substantiates the phenomenon of dominant group feelings of victimization at the prospect of sharing power equally with members of minority groups. A great deal of recent attention has been paid in the United States to the fact that around 2050, the United States will become a “majority-minority” country, meaning that whites will no longer be a majority of Americans. Taking advantage of the salience of this information, some social psycholo-

gists have tested what happens when white Americans are primed with it.

In a 2014 study, the psychologists Maureen Craig and Jennifer Richeson found that simply making salient the impending national shift to a “majority-minority” country significantly increased politically unaffiliated white Americans’ support for right-wing policies.⁴ For example, reading about an impending racial shift of the country from majority white to majority nonwhite made white American subjects less inclined to support affirmative action, more inclined to support restrictions on immigration, and, perhaps surprisingly, more likely to support “race neutral” conservative policies such as increasing defense spending. Summarizing this research in a forthcoming review article, Maureen Craig, Julian Rucker, and Jennifer Richeson write, “this growing body of work finds clear evidence that White Americans (i.e., the current racial majority) experience the impending ‘majority-minority’ shift as a threat to their dominant (social, economic, political, and cultural) status.”⁵ This feeling of threat can be marshaled politically as support for right-wing movements. This dialectic is far from native to the United States; it is rather a general feature of group psychology. The exploitation of the feeling of victimization by dominant groups at the prospect of sharing citizenship and power with minorities is a universal element of contemporary international fascist politics.

In the face of discrimination, oppressed groups throughout history have risen up in movements that proclaimed pride for their endangered identities. In Western Europe, the Jewish nationalism of the Zionist movement arose as a response to toxic anti-Semitism. In the United States, black nationalism arose as a response to toxic racism. In their origins, these nationalist movements were *responses* to oppression. Anticolonialist struggles typically take place under the banner of nationalism; for example, Mahatma Gandhi employed Indian nationalism as a tool against British rule. This kind of nationalism, the nationalism that arises from oppression, is not fascist in origin. These forms of nationalism, in their original formations, are equality-driven nationalist movements.

In colonialism, the imperial nation typically presents itself as the bearer of universal ideals. For example, British colonialists in Kenya presented Christianity as the universal ideal and the many local tribal religions as primitive and savage. In part a response to this religious oppression, the Mau Mau rebellion against Britain valorized the traditional Gikuyu religion—Mau Mau rebels took an oath to Ngai, the Gikuyu god. The Mau Mau colonialist struggle used nationalist religious ideals to fight colonialism. But the goal of the Mau Mau struggle was not to fight for the *superiority* of the Gikuyu religious traditions over the British

religious traditions. The goal was rather to fight for the *equality* of the Gikuyu traditions against the British demonization of them as forms of primitive savagery. To do so, it was necessary to elevate these traditions, to hold them as sacrosanct and special, not as a means of repudiating the value of British traditions, but rather as a means to emphasize a demand for equal respect. This kind of nationalism is therefore in no sense *opposed* to equality; instead, despite appearances to the contrary, equality is its *goal*.

The case is similar with the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States today. Its opponents try to represent the slogan as the illiberal nationalist claim that *only* black lives matter. But the slogan is hardly intended as a repudiation of the value of white lives in the United States. Rather, it intends to point out that in the United States, white lives have been taken to matter more than other lives. The point of the slogan Black Lives Matter is to call attention to a failure of equal respect. In its context, it means, "Black lives matter *too*."

At the core of fascism is loyalty to tribe, ethnic identity, religion, tradition, or, in a word, *nation*. But, in stark contrast to a version of nationalism with equality as its goal, fascist nationalism is a repudiation of the liberal democratic ideal; it is nationalism in the service of domination, with the goal of preserving, maintaining, or gaining a position at the top of a hierarchy of power and status.

The difference between the nationalism motivated by oppression and nationalism for the sake of domination is clear when one reflects upon their respective relationships with equality. But that difference can be invisible from the inside. Whether or not the anguish that accompanies loss of privileged status is similar to the sense of oppression that accompanies genuine marginalization, it is anguish nevertheless. If I grew up in a country in which my religious holidays were the national holidays, it would feel like marginalization to have my children grow up in a more egalitarian country in which their religious holidays and traditions are just one of many. If I grew up in a society in which every character in the movies I see and the television programs I watch looked like me, it would feel like marginalization to see the occasional protagonist who does not. I would start to feel that my culture is no longer "for me." If I grew up seeing men as heroes and women as passive objects who worship them, it would feel like oppression to be robbed of my felt birthright by having to regard women as equals in the workplace or on the battlefield. Rectifying unjust inequalities will always bring pain to those who benefited from such injustices. This pain will inevitably be experienced by some as oppression.

Fascist propaganda typically features aching hymns to the sense of anguish that accompanies loss of dominant status. This sense of loss, which is genuine, is manipulated in fascist politics into aggrieved victimhood and exploited to justify past, continuing, or new forms of oppression.

For a white working-class male who is no longer employed, for structural economic reasons, to be told to “check your privilege” may increase the likelihood that he might see a level playing field in the agenda of white supremacy. Fascist politics makes great sport of such earnest liberal injunctions. Inquiry into structural inequality requires collective public reflection on the strong evidence that reveals how race and gender-based status has given white males, and to a lesser degree white females, degrees of freedom never fully available to black citizens. “Check your privilege” is a call to whites to recognize the insulated social reality they navigate daily. However, the phrase is flung back into the public sphere as hypocrisy on the part of liberal elites, because white nationalist propaganda finds no racism against black citizens in 2017 America, but much against whites.

Fascist politics covers up structural inequality by attempting to invert, misrepresent, and subvert the long, hard effort to address it. Affirmative action at its best was

designed to recognize and address structural inequality. But by falsely presenting affirmative action as uncoupled from individual merit, some of its detractors recast advocates of affirmative action as pursuing their own race- or gender-based “nationalism” to the detriment of hardworking white Americans, regardless of evidence. The experience of losing a once unquestioned, settled dignity—the dignity that comes with being white, not black—is easily captured by a language of white victimization.

The Men’s Rights Activist (MRA) movement in the United States in the 1990s crystallized the loss of privilege experienced as victimization. In his 2013 book, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*, the Stony Brook sociologist Michael Kimmel writes:

When white men are cast as the oppressors, normal, everyday middle-class white guys don’t often feel all that power trickling down to them. . . . To the MRAs, the real victims in American society are men, and so they built organizations around men’s anxieties and anger at feminism, groups like the Coalition for Free Men, the National Congress for Men, Men Achieving Liberty and Equality (MALE), and Men’s Rights Inc. (MR, Inc.). These groups proclaim their commitment to equality and to ending sexism—which was why they were compelled to fight against feminism.⁶

Kimmel notes “a curious characteristic of these new legions of angry white men: although white men still have most of the power and control in the world, these particular white men feel like victims.” He connects this sense of victimhood to the perpetuation of a mythic patriarchal past:

These ideas also reflect a somewhat nostalgic longing for that past world, when men believed they could simply take their places among the nation’s elite, simply by working hard and applying themselves. Alas, such a world never existed; economic elites have always managed to reproduce themselves despite the ideals of a meritocracy. But that hasn’t stopped men from believing it. It is the American Dream. And when men fail, they are humiliated, with nowhere to place their anger.⁷

Promulgating a mythical hierarchal past works to create unreasonable expectations. When these expectations are not met, it feels like victimhood.⁸

Those who employ fascist political tactics deliberately take advantage of this emotion, manufacturing a sense of aggrieved victimization among the majority population, directing it at a group that is not responsible for it and promising to alleviate the feeling of victimization by punishing that group. In her book *Down Girl*, Kate Manne

illustrates this by drawing a distinction between patriarchy and misogyny. Patriarchy, according to Manne, is the hierarchal ideology that engenders the unreasonable expectations of high status. Misogyny is what faces women who are blamed when patriarchal expectations are left unfulfilled. The logic of fascist politics has a vivid model in Manne's logic of misogyny.

Breitbart News is a powerful far-right U.S. media outlet filled with anti-immigrant propaganda representing refugees as public health threats, threats to civilization, and threats to law and order. In such outlets, we find clear expression of the way in which an aggrieved sense of victimization of dominant majorities can be weaponized for potential political gain. *Breitbart* has run dozens of articles with headlines related to Somali refugees in the United States, including those with titles such as "296 Refugees Diagnosed with Active TB in Minnesota, Ten Times Any Other State; Majority Are Somalis," and "Somalis: Least Educated of Refugees Arriving to U.S. in FY 2017." *Breitbart* was only a part of a wave of such propaganda in the United States around this time. In a video viewed three million times since it was posted in April 2015, Ann Corcoran of the far-right anti-immigrant group Refugee Resettlement Watch speaks of a plan of "Muslim colonization" of the United States, aided and abetted by international organizations such as the United Nations, federal agencies such as the U.S. State Department, and "Chris-

tian and Jewish groups assigned to seed them throughout the country." These outlets spread a sense of paranoia at a "fifth column" of "liberal" groups in our midst using the vocabulary of human rights to undermine the nation's traditions. But in doing so, they not only undermine liberal ideals, but also suggest that their targets should be subject to intense scrutiny or punishment merely on the basis that the dominant group feels fearful.

Understanding the dynamics of power in a society is crucial to assessing claims of victimhood. Equality-driven nationalism can rapidly turn oppressive itself, if one is not paying enough attention to shifts in power. Some problematic nationalist sentiments arise from perfectly genuine histories of oppression. Serbians have unquestionably been oppressed in the past. And one does not have to go back to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389, from which Serbians draw a great deal of national anger and identity, to encounter such oppression; World War II will suffice, when Serbians were murdered en masse in concentration camps. Contemporary Serbians come from families who are able to summon up a legacy of persecution. Serbian nationalists used this background to justify the persecution of less powerful and more marginalized local Muslim populations.

In 1986, the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences

published a memorandum that is generally regarded as having set out the tenets of the toxic Serbian nationalism that led to so much subsequent bloodshed in the former Yugoslavia. The document serves as a useful guide to the connection between victimization and oppressive nationalist sentiment. At the time, the majority of the residents in the province of Kosovo, who were ethnically Albanian, were requesting greater autonomy. The document's authors describe the Albanian treatment of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo as a "physical, political, legal, and cultural genocide of the Serbian population." They declare, "No other Yugoslav nation has had its cultural and spiritual integrity so brutally trampled upon as the Serbian nation. No one else's literary and artistic heritage has been so despoiled and ravaged as the Serbian heritage." They speak of "consistent economic discrimination" against Serbia, and unyielding "economic subordination." They declare that the "vindictive policy toward this republic has not lost any of its edge with the passing of time. On the contrary, encouraged by its own success, it has grown ever stronger, to the point of genocide." The document uses a dramatically exaggerated narrative of Serbian victimization to call for a recommitment to the defense of ethnic Serbs, as well as to Serbia's traditional history and culture.

Slobodan Milošević was the president of Serbia from 1989 until 1997. On June 28, 1989, Milošević delivered a speech to a vast crowd gathered on the battlefield of the

Battle of Kosovo, at the celebration of its six hundredth anniversary. Milošević blamed the Serbian defeat at the hands of the Ottomans at the Battle of Kosovo, as well as “the fate Serbia suffered for a full six centuries,” on a lack of Serbian unity—that is, a failure of Serbian nationalist spirit. In Milošević’s speech, he said that the failure of Serbians to have nationalist pride had led over the centuries to “humiliation” and “agony” exceeding the cost of the fascist reign of terror during which several hundred thousand Serbians were killed. According to Milošević, the only way to end the centuries of horror was to embrace national unity—in other words, a Serbian nationalist agenda. The narrative of Serbian victimization led him to political victory. It also justified a series of brutal wars, including in Kosovo, after which Milošević was charged with genocide and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Tribunal for actions taken against the Albanian population of Kosovo. There is no question that Serbians have, in the past, been oppressed by multiple forces. It hardly mattered that many of the groups Milošević would target were not actually responsible for any oppression of Serbians. Serbia’s recent history under demagogic nationalists shows how a history of past oppression can be marshaled in fascist politics for military mobilization against phantom enemies.

Victimhood is an overwhelming emotion that also conceals the contradiction between equality-driven and

domination-driven nationalist movements. When groups in power use the mask of nationalism of the oppressed, or of genuine oppression in the past, to advance their own hegemony, they are using it to undermine equality. When the Israeli right uses the unquestioned history of Jewish oppression to assert Jewish dominance over Palestinian lands and lives, they are relying on the sense of victimization to obscure the contradiction between a struggle for equal respect and a struggle for dominance. Oppression is a powerful motivation for action, but the questions of who is wielding it when, under what context and against whom, remain eternally crucial.

. . .

Nationalism is at the core of fascism. The fascist leader employs a sense of collective victimhood to create a sense of group identity that is by its nature opposed to the cosmopolitan ethos and individualism of liberal democracy. The group identity can be variously based—on skin color, on religion, on tradition, on ethnic origin. But it is always contrasted with a perceived other against whom the nation is to be defined. Fascist nationalism creates a dangerous “them” to guard against, at times to battle with, to control, in order to restore group dignity.

On October 12, 2017, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán gave a speech at the International Consultation on Christian Persecution in Budapest. He begins

by speaking of the “undoubtedly unfair” persecution of Christians in Europe, which he labels as “discriminatory” and “painful.” After extolling Hungary’s traditional role as defenders of Christian Europe, he declares that “today it is a fact that Christianity is the world’s most persecuted religion,” which according to him places “the future of the European way of life, and of our identity” into peril. According to him, “the greatest danger we [Europeans] face today is the indifferent, apathetic silence of a Europe which denies its Christian roots.” The manifestation of this potentially catastrophic indifference to Europe’s Christian roots is generous European immigration policies: “A group of Europe’s intellectual and political leaders wishes to create a mixed society in Europe which, within just a few generations, will utterly transform the cultural and ethnic composition of our continent—and consequently its Christian identity.”

In Orbán’s speech, we have all the elements of the victimology of fascist politics. Orbán whips up irrational fear of immigrants, using Hungary’s mythic past as the supposed defender of European Christianity to present himself as the warrior-leader who is brave enough to defend Christian Europe, which has been imperiled by the liberal elites (“Europe’s intellectual and political leaders”) who would let “the most persecuted religion in the world” be undermined from within by letting in a wave of immigrants. The refugees from brutal foreign wars are,

in his eyes, a powerful invading force who seek to establish a “fifth column” inside Christian Europe’s walls. Orbán asks his audience to repudiate “human rights” (ignoring their own home in Christianity) and other outdated concepts. As victims of persecution, he urges his audience to stand behind him as he returns Hungary to its glorious past as the mythic defender of Christian Europe against the barbarian, lawless hordes.