

We will be great again: Historical victimhood in populist discourse

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Omar Al-Ghazzi** 

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Abstract

This article explores historical victimhood as a feature of contemporary populist discourse. It is about how populist leaders invoke meta-history to make self-victimising claims as a means for consolidating power. I argue that historical victimhood propagates a forked historical consciousness – a view of history as a series of junctures where good fought evil – that enables the projection of alleged victimhood into the past and the future, while the present is portrayed as a regenerating fateful choice between humiliation and a promised golden age. I focus on the cases of the United States and Turkey and examine two key speeches delivered by presidents Donald Trump and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2017. My case-study approach aims to show how the same narrative form of historical victimhood, with its temporal logic and imaginary, latches on widely different contexts and political cultures with the effect of conflating the leader with the people, solidifying divisions in society, and threatening opponents.

Keywords

Collective memory, populism, Turkey, United States, victimhood

Introduction

With the global rise of populist politics since the 2016 Brexit vote and the US Trump election, tropes of self-victimisation have become a common discursive feature across different political systems. Populist leaders worldwide have come to rouse support through claiming they were wronged, targeted, and injured by a wide array of actors: the elite, the media, and external enemies – all of which are said to be conspiring against the leader, the

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nation and the people. In this article, I focus on one aspect of the discourse that enables collective self-victimisation and the co-optation by those in power of the victim narrative and position. This is historical victimhood; the way that a chain of equivalent binaries between ‘us’ versus ‘them’ – ‘us’ as the patriots, faithful, authentic and ‘them’ as the traitors, faithless and intruders – gets projected onto meta-historical narratives in order to claim victimhood status. In my analysis, I focus on US President Donald Trump and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to examine how populist leaders make the same discursive use of history as a temporal template of collective decline versus ascent in order to mobilise their base against political opponents. My aim is to explain the logic of historical victimhood and how it gets deployed in political speech.

Historical victimhood narratives are rooted in a temporal logic that uses an imagined history as evidence of contemporary self-victimisation. They enable populist leaders to conceal their power by portraying the self as a true ‘underdog’ and opponents as the inauthentic adversary. Projecting victimhood onto meta-historical narratives about a conflict between victims and oppressors allows for imagining the trajectories of communities along a ‘zigzag’ historical timeline, wherein the present is portrayed as a juncture similar to fateful junctures in the past (Zerubavel, 2003). Simultaneously, populists tautologically proclaim that the future will show how they will prevail – animating their language with the idea of a golden age in the past that has been snatched away from their nation and people (Stanley, 2018). The logic of historical victimhood, I argue, propagates a forked historical consciousness and seeks to monopolise how it is imagined in terms of a series of points in history wherein the trajectory of the community may take a wrong turn.

Claiming victim status, projecting that on to historical narratives, and mobilising others to change the course of history in order to advance political goals is not new and it can be situated within different political phenomena from revolutionary and resistance movements to nationalism, populism and neo-fascism. As I will elaborate, the difference among them lies in how it is operationalised, by whom, and against whom. When populists invoke victimhood, their ultimate objective is to extend their power and grip on society, but the degree of specification of those deemed responsible for collective victimisation and decline, and the degree to which the call to punish and eliminate them is acted upon, differ. This article then examines the question: how are populist claims of self-victimhood projected on meta-historical narratives? And how is the narrative form of historical victimhood projected onto different political contexts? Taking a case-study approach, I deploy a multicultural discourse analysis that draws on different cultures and political contexts (Shi-xu, 2013), and a discourse historical approach with a focus on intertextuality and recontextualisation (Wodak, 2013), in order to analyse how articulations about history convey a sense of self-victimisation.

While I draw on other global examples, I focus on the two cases of US President Trump and Turkish President Erdoğan by analysing a key speech by each: Trump’s inauguration speech in January 2017 and Erdoğan’s speech marking the first anniversary of the coup attempt against him, which he delivered in July 2017. The two speeches I chose are similar in that they were delivered on key national occasions, the US president’s first official address to the nation, and the speech commemorating the first anniversary of overcoming the coup in Turkey. The choice of these two vastly different countries is to demonstrate how their leaders rely on the same narrative form of historical victimhood

and how that interacts with each country's political culture (Taş, 2020). I chose the time-frame of 2017 because the period is seen as a time of empowerment of populists around the world, since the world's leading Western democracy elected a populist president who champions a nationalist authoritarian agenda (Gusterson, 2017). For his part, though President Erdoğan has been in power since 2003, he steadily steered his country towards a more authoritarian populism – culminating in an aggressive reaction to the 2016 attempted coup that saw the persecution of a wide array of government critics. This comparison is not unique to these two contexts. In fact, my approach could be broadened in future work to include other populist leaders from Brazil to India but, for the purposes of this article, Turkey and the United States offer productive cases of what I seek to demonstrate. I will first explain how I am using the term historical victimhood.

Historical victimhood between form and content

Since the canonical work of Maurice Halbwachs (1992), collective memory scholars have demonstrated how individual memories are intrinsically weaved within collective narratives about the past and how group memories are strategically forged by powerful actors and institutions to shape identity in a way that responds to contemporary social and political circumstances. Zerubavel (2003) argues that the understanding of collective memory should go beyond the content of what interpretation of the past is invoked to the 'highly formulaic plot structures we often use for narrating the past' (p. 4). So it is insufficient to consider *what* a society remembers, as it is also important to consider *how* it does so. In other words, powerful actors not only strategically advance an understanding of particular past events in order to serve their current political interests, they also push for particular kinds of story forms that shape the ways they tell all stories.

Populism, in this sense, relies on a particular narrative about the past that serves its leaders' political interests. Mudde (2004) defines populism as "[an] ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elite'." (p. 543). The notion of purity lends itself well to the past in opposition to the impurities – the injustices and difficulties – that people experience in the present. Imagining a past in which 'we' were not victims fuels the affective power of feeling like a victim today. It is that power that populist leaders seek to exploit. Applying the notion of memory structures to populism, the plot forms that feature prominently are those that establish binaries that divide a society between traitors and patriots, intruders and natives, and the faithless and faithful. In Laclau's (2005: 96) terms, these binaries become a 'chain of equivalence' as one leads to the other and as their signification gets extended. 'The more extended the chain, the less these signifiers will be attached to their original particularistic demands' and so the more malleable becomes their signification.

An effective way to establish this binary chain is to extend its signification onto different temporal terrains. Populist leaders rely on zigzag structures of a rise and fall and/or fall and rise of the nation – portraying themselves and their supporters as responsible for the rise, and their opponents are blamed for the decline. The understanding of the past and present is focused on the idea of a juncture, where the future can only dramatically take one of two routes in the direction of either a golden age or the dark ages. What these narrative forms have in common is that they involve a 'dramatic change of course' and

turning points in the imagined trajectory of a community (Zerubavel, 2003: 19). The rise and fall narrative as deployed by populist leaders takes shape along the lines of: ‘We were in a golden age. We were victimized and lived through a time of humiliation. It is now time that I lead you back into that golden age’.

This formulation relies on what I am calling a forked historical consciousness that understands and speaks of history as a series of junctures scattered across time. As Al-Azmeh (2009) writes about the intersections between populist and Islamist discourses, history becomes “cleft between origins and corruptions, between authenticity and the snares of enemies” (p. 105). This narrative form is most effectively used by movements and leaders seeking to get into power. Once in power, the framing of this story form focuses on how adversaries want to reverse progress or are blocking the leader from pursuing his or her emancipatory project. In either case, a binary between us and them is solidified in the present and justified in relation to the past and the future. The leader is portrayed as the one to direct the zigzag structure into the right direction. Leaders position themselves as the point of intersection, the node that can shift the public’s trajectory into a better upward future and/or can prevent a humiliating downturn (for an illustration of this, see Taş, 2020).

Accordingly, the populist leader becomes invested in invoking a historical trajectory that promises future greatness but is always under threat of a painful decline. This is achieved by propagating historical consciousness within the general public. Rüsen (2004) defines historical consciousness as ‘a key orientational element’ (p. 67) and a conception of the flow of the course of time. Historical consciousness ‘bestows upon actuality a temporal direction, an orientation that can guide action intentionally by the agency of historical memory’ (Rüsen, 2004: 68). This is done in two main ways. The first is to make specific references to historic events and compare them to the present in order to guide political action. The second is through making references to ‘history’ at large. In relation to the former, leaders often draw parallels between the present and several aspects of their country’s or community’s history that are presented as a juncture, after which ‘history took a wrong turn’. This discursive move establishes parallels between the situation in the present and imagined junctures in the collective past. Needless to say, references do not have to be about actual historic events. The same way that populist leaders spin present-day politics to their advantage, they deploy mnemonic spins to reframe historic events.

A known example is the way the ‘Brexit’ campaign in the United Kingdom used the zigzag memory structure to establish equivalence between the choice of either staying or leaving the European Union with different historic junctures. For instance, pro-Leave politicians compared voting Leave in the referendum with victory over the Nazis in the Second World War. Boris Johnson, a leading figure in the campaign, stated that the EU is pursuing a similar goal to Nazi Germany in trying to create a powerful European superstate (Ross, 2016). Therefore, he implied that Britain’s exit from the EU is a comparable victory to that of the Second World War. While this is a false, and a quite offensive formulation, the comparison at least refers to an actual event in history – that is, British victory in the Second World War. In other instances, the deployment of history by the Leave campaign went further afield from actual modern history, such as the description of the Leave vote as a means to regain British independence. The right-wing Brexit

Party portrayed Britain as a historic victim and accused the EU of colonising Britain (Boffey, 2019). This can be described as a co-optation of postcolonial historiography by politicians from a former colonial power. For example, the headline on the cover of the right-wing tabloid *The Sun* on 23 June 2016, the day following the referendum result announcement, was 'Independence Day'. The image on the frontpage showed the sun rising from behind the map of Great Britain on the globe, which is a visual reminder of the 'empire on which the sun never sets', as the British empire was known. This is an example of how the deployment of the zigzag memory structure is infused with nostalgia for a constructed past.

The second tactic used to propagate historical consciousness is through invoking history at large. There are several metaphors and idioms deployed in political discourse for that purpose, for example 'history will be the judge', which invokes history as a future arbiter that will eventually prove that the leader was right in the present. Another similar reference is in accusing adversaries of being 'on the wrong side of history', which again constructs history in terms of futurity by making a tautological argument that the leader's desired course of action is correct because the future (history) will show it is. 'The trash heap of history' is another popular metaphor used to threaten opponents that they shall be defeated and that their destiny is to become irrelevant and forgotten (Al-Ghazzi, 2016b). Like the other expressions, it is tautological in projecting power over the present by way of a temporal re-positioning as if one is in the future looking back at the past, which would be what we call the present today.

In summary, the populist use of these tropes and metaphors about history at large aims to invoke a forked historical consciousness, by which I mean an awareness of turning points in memory plot structures. These tropes allow populist leaders to portray themselves as historic agents able to change collective trajectories and pathways. In its basic structure, this formulation is at the heart of political dialectics, particularly in revolutionary times. The question here is: how does this plot structure differ in revolutionary versus populist politics?

Victimhood from revolution to populism and nationalism

As Taylor (1985: 32) suggests in explaining the Hegelian conception of action, the gap between two undertakings, that of claiming to pursue one aspect of history, while breaking away from another, is the historical contradiction that moves politics along. This obviously takes different forms depending on the political system and context. That gap between pursuit of history and breaking away from it, he suggests, widens in revolutionary times when political actors assert a common identity and thrust themselves into collective action against an existing order based upon a consciousness of the ontological link between their action and the purpose animating it.

Modern revolution involves telling a new story, which is typically about changing the course of history by ending despotism and ushering in a new era of self-determination. Revolutionaries typically mobilise by labelling authority as the adversary and portraying themselves as agents of history, in the sense of changing the future course of history, by way of mobilising to eliminate those who have long victimised them (see Badiou, 2012). However, while in revolutionary discourse, the agent of historic change corresponds to

those participating in the movement and seeks to convince others to join, in populist discourse, the focus is on the leader and on exclusionary politics. The other difference is that the revolutionary investment in the idea of a historic crossroads is thought to be short term as it has an urgent objective of overthrowing regimes in power. While in populist discourse, once a leader is in power, the objective is to prolong the idea of a fateful choice or a historic juncture in order to justify continued exclusion and violence. Accordingly, in the analysis of populism, it is important to consider the differences between political orientations that seek to change the status quo versus those that seek to extend it (rather than make generalisations about the differences in left and right-wing populisms). In Laclau's (2007) formulation, populism is not necessarily defined by any particular political or ideological content; rather, it structures the representation of whatever political content it articulates in particular ways, including the invocation of 'the people' as an empty signifier (Chatterjee, 2020: 82).

In populist narratives, leaders position themselves as embodying the people's agency and as those who can propel society into the desired future in order to return to a distant glorious past and to break away from the humiliation of the near past. In analysing the US case, Kelly (2020) links victimhood to a rhetoric of *ressentiment*, an emotional-moral framework that aims to continuously 'regenerate the felt intensities that underwrite demands for revenge and lamentations of victimhood' (p. 5). Invoking a stark contrast between decline, that is, the opponents' agenda, and rebirth as their own, is one powerful way for populists to regenerate that affect. Accordingly, it is this discursive and affective strategy by populist leaders to rouse and sustain support that this article analyses. My interest is not in designating which group is actually a victim and which is not; rather it is to explore how leaders have effectively relied on victimisation tropes to shore up support and how they adapted them to their contexts by projecting meaning on a formulaic temporal framework. My focus seeks to show that populist discourse including historical victimhood tropes are used in and adapted to different political contexts and, thus, its analysis should go beyond a focus on Western liberal democratic systems.

Populism, of course, does not emerge from a vacuum but is an extension of nationalism. In fact, claims to victimhood are familiar territory in the field of nationalism. Many countries' national identity and militancy is intertwined with narratives of self-victimisation and invocations of trauma, aiming at evoking sympathy from third parties to their conflicts (Lerner, 2020). It is no coincidence then that nationalism scholars have linked nationalist victimhood to the justification of wars and aggression. Williams (2008: 82) draws on the cases of Israel and Serbia to argue that in both countries there is a pervasive and enduring sense of victimhood, which is characterised by a mythical moralisation that consistently displaces responsibility for aggression under the cover of being purely 'done by' and never 'doing to'. Vicarious victimhood, he continues, fuels aggressive militancy, wherein 'nothing counts as evidence of one's own empowerment, since one is forever a victim, always under threat, always misunderstood' (Williams, 2008: 89). In the case of Israel, even the legacy of its resounding historic victory against Arab states in the 1967 war got incorporated into 'narcissistic victimhood' narratives, as Hage (2010) suggests, under the rationale that if Israel cannot maintain the omnipotent position that its victory offered, it would be under existential threat.

In postcolonial contexts, the overcoming of national victimhood by the hands of the coloniser is at the centre of historiography – a formulation that has been co-opted by populist authoritarians to legitimate their rule. Hage (2010) argues that anticolonial nationalism, with its logic of past injury, offers a history of the postcolonial nation along the lines of: ‘We have been victims. We have been oppressed. We have been disempowered and the aim is for us to re-empower ourselves again’ (p. 11) after achieving independence. While this had reflected genuine victimhood and mobilised resistance movements to achieve self-rule, decades after independence the official discourse in postcolonial populist states has fixated on the anticolonial moment to perpetuate a sense of victimhood vis-à-vis the West and to divert attention away from their authoritarianism and defeats (for example on Syria, see Al-Ghazzi, 2013).

Furthermore, the rise of postcolonial states has not necessarily led to a move away from a focus on past victimhood. With the rise of Asian states like India and China, tropes of victimhood shifted focus but have become more pervasive in state-sponsored communication. In India, contemporary Hindu nationalist historiography has reformulated history from a focus on colonialism and postcolonial nation-building into a narrative of victimhood that blames historic Muslim invasions for the decline of Hindu civilisation and nationhood (Sharma, 2011). Writing about China, Wang (2008) contends that while under Mao (in power 1949–1976) a victor narrative dominated Communist historiography, there was a shift in the narrative in the 1990s that coincided with China’s economic rise and fears of public protests. Instead of emphasising victories, China reformulated its school history textbooks to stress victimhood and humiliation through the idea of China’s ‘100 years of humiliation’ in reference to Western and Japanese invasions during the century preceding Communist rule. With the aim of portraying Communist rule as China’s rebirth, the country’s growing confidence served to activate, not necessarily assuage, the historical memory of past humiliation and victimhood (Wang, 2008: 804).

In the United States, as Johnson (2017) points out, nationalism often takes the shape of antipathy to government that is enmeshed with an ideology of liberal individualism. The populist message of the US right, which was effectively amplified by Trump, expands on the sense of precarity of the disenfranchised and encourages well-off supporters to imagine themselves as ‘occupying parallel positions of victimhood to subaltern subjects’ and as getting violated by the political establishment (Johnson, 2017: 239). Cole (2019) traces this cultural phenomenon of ‘victimology’ in the United States back to the 1980s. While claims of victimhood were aimed at demanding justice by the disenfranchised, she argues, they were met with a counter ‘anti-victimist’ campaign, which, using familiar neoliberal tropes about the entrepreneurial self, accused individuals who claim to be victims of having a ‘victim mentality’ and of aiming to extract undeserved reward (Cole, 2019). Yet, as Younge (2004) notes, that changed in the 2000s as the powerful harnessed victimhood for their purposes realising that ‘it can provide the moral basis for redress, retaliation and even revenge in order to right any given wrong – real or imagined’. Situating claims of victimhood in a new media and activism environment, Banet-Weiser (2018) suggests that they have come to circulate according to a logic of empowerment that permeates economies of visibility and their mediated spaces.

A detailed examination of the politics of victimhood is beyond the scope of this article. However, by deploying a more in-depth focus on the cases of the United States and

Turkey, my objective is to explore the temporal template followed by the two countries' leaders in order to get at the similarity of form and the variation in content of the narratives deployed in their populist discourse. In doing so, I consider how this template interacts with a country's history and political culture. In my comparative approach, I am also cognizant of the differentiation in the form of the memory narrative on a metonymic spectrum, in terms of how explicit the call is for violence and exclusion of those targeted by the chains of equivalence between the binary divisions of us and them/victims and aggressors/patriots and traitors/the faithful and the faithless.

Trump and American historical victimhood

Historical victimhood has been intrinsic to US president Trump's message. His 2016 campaign slogan 'Make America Great Again', known by its acronym MAGA, captured his election campaign's strategy and became the mantra of his political movement. It insinuates that the American people are victims of having their country's greatness taken away from them (Bottici, 2016). The 'again' in the slogan promises that the president will renew its greatness through a future return to this mythical America of unidentified historical origin, but that points to 'a white, economically-robust, and socially conservative America' (Al-Ghazzi, 2016a). Trump's final campaign rallying cry before the ballots opened was 'the system itself is rigged against you' – and, therefore, a vote for him would be a rejection of the victimisation of the average American (McMillan, 2017) and would change the course of American future history.

After winning the election, President Trump built on his original message. From the outset of his days in power, in his inaugural speech, he cemented his populist message and its temporal logic (Politico Staff, 2017). First, he equates himself and his interests with those of 'the people' by stating from the start that 'today we are not merely transferring power from one administration to another, or from one party to another, but we are transferring power from Washington D.C., and giving it back to you, the people'. In that way, Trump portrays his inauguration as a fateful turn in the temporal trajectory of the American people from decline to ascent.

Second, in his speech, Trump lays out the Manichean view of society and anchors it in a meta-historical narrative. He positions himself, and therefore the people, against a powerful and adversarial establishment victimising Americans. The date 20 January 2017, he declares, 'will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again. The forgotten men and women of our country, will be forgotten no longer'. Here, we see the Janus-faced and the tautological temporal formulation that invokes two types of history: history as the future that shows how the present is durable, and history as the near past, which will be no longer because Trump is changing the course of how the country has been run.

Third, Trump elaborates on how the American people have been victimised and the different ways that their aspirations have been crushed by the system. 'This American carnage stops right here and stops right now', he declares. Through the term 'American carnage', he paints a picture of the pain Americans allegedly endured and the extent to which they have been victimised. In this way, he extends the alienation that subaltern Americans feel towards the system into a malaise suffered by all his supporters,

regardless of their socio-economic status. In temporal terms, the words ‘now’ and ‘here’ are used to point to the present as the point after which history will take a different turn – one that would resume the authentic upward trajectory of the American nation following years of ‘carnage’. After insinuating that Americans have been duped by previous administrations and by foreign governments, resulting in a depleted military, a decaying infrastructure and shuttered factories, he reiterates that all this victimisation ‘is the past, and now we are looking only to the future . . . from this day forward, it’s going to be only America first’.

In this speech and other speeches, Trump lays the blame for American victimhood mostly at ‘the establishment’, foreign governments, previous administrations, the media and the opposition. The blamed adversary continues to be adapted to political circumstances. It began with Mexicans and Muslims, along with rival Republicans. In the 2016 Presidential campaign ‘Trump moved on to Crooked Hillary and, in the final stretch, globalists, the establishment and the “Rigged System”, always in reference to America’s decline’ (McMillan, 2017: 19). In 2020, in light of the COVID-19 crisis, Trump blamed China, the World Health Organization, his democratic opponents, the media and ‘ANTIFA’ for the health and economic crisis. On the eve of the 2020 election, Trump repeated the call he made in 2016 – tweeting that a vote for his opponent Joe Biden is a vote for ‘Globalists, Communists, Socialists, and Wealthy Liberal Hypocrites who want to silence, censor, cancel and punish you’ (PTI, 2020). Following his election defeat, he went further in telling his supporters that the election was fraudulent and was stolen from them.

Pushing his Manichean worldview of good versus evil, he establishes a set of binaries between ‘natives’ and intruders, patriots and traitors, and so on, all of which clearly xenophobic, racialised and gendered. In doing so, he is similar to other populist leaders. Cammaerts (2020) compares Trump to Narendra Modi’s leadership in India and argues that both go beyond populism as they move ‘firmly in the direction of fascist and extreme right ideology, shifting more and more from a democratic agonistic adversary into an anti-democratic antagonistic enemy’ (p. 2). While recognising the similarities, it is still important to locate differences, not least in how explicitly a leader instigates violence.

Trump’s call for violence against those he deems as the enemy is generally disguised. However, many of his interventions, and the ways they are mediated, fill in the blanks in the meaning-making process – making it clear who are responsible for victimising the United States. On numerous occasions, Trump has called for the use of violence. For example, during the COVID-19 lockdown in April 2020, he called on his followers to ‘liberate’ three states with Democrat governors, and to protect the Second amendment (*BBC*, 2020) – basically, to act upon their alleged victimhood. The reference to the Second amendment (right to bear arms) alludes to the use of violence, and the fact that the three states mentioned are governed by the opposition party, sends a strong message about who the enemy is and what to do about it. His words empowered ultra-right wing and White supremacist groups. For instance, in the weeks following these statements, a plot to kidnap the Democrat governor of Michigan was uncovered (Gabbat, 2020). Unsurprisingly, one far-right group calls itself, ‘American Revolution 2.0’, and claims to be instigating a second American Revolution to correct the course of history in parallel to what happened in the 18th century anti-colonial revolt against Great Britain (Wilson and Evans, 2020). This is a clear example of how historical victimhood, and the forked

historical consciousness it co-opts, is operationalised by far-right groups in the United States and how that facilitates a shift to anti-democratic politics.

Erdoğan and Turkish historical victimhood

Unlike established democracy in the United States, Turkey's political system is usually described as a weak democracy, given the powerful role that the army has historically played in political life. Head of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been in power since 2003, serving as the country's prime minister until 2014 and then as president. After a decade in power, Erdoğan steered Turkey towards more illiberal and authoritarian rule. This move was compounded by the failure of the EU accession talks, the collapse of the settlement with the Kurdish movement, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, and significantly, the coup d'état attempt he faced in 2016 by a faction of the army aligned with the opposition Gülen movement. By 2019, there was widespread crackdown on freedom of speech with an estimated 120 journalists imprisoned (Kucukgocmen, 2019) and 700 academics facing criminal prosecution (Redden, 2019).

Although escalating in the ways it is operationalised, as Yilmaz (2017) argues, historical victimhood has been intrinsic to Turkish-Islamist identity and subject formation – which holds that historically the secular Kemalist Republican project has victimised Islam and religious Turks. In the case of Turkish nationalism, there are competing imaginaries that rely on a forked historical consciousness: a secular Kemalist imaginary that celebrates the founder of the republic, who changed Turkey's historic path from backward Ottoman religiosity to modernisation, and an Islamic imaginary that posits that the majority of pious Turks have been victimised by Westernisation – and that the AKP has changed the country's path to put an end to this injustice. It must be stressed that this not a clear-cut binary as these two narratives feed into each other depending on the political moment. Building on this historical context, the increasing populism of President Erdoğan activates this victim identity orientation to stir the feelings of supporters and direct them against his opponents (Tokdoğan, 2020).

Erdoğan's political discourse is a prime example of populism in terms of his self-presentation as an anti-establishment 'man of the people' – stressing his humble and pious upbringing. Increasingly in the last decade, Erdoğan's populism has become more nationalist, moralistic and anti-Western as he has resorted to more conspiratorial language 'that sees any contention as orchestrated by a dark international elite force, called the mastermind (*üst akıl*), and any opposition as its subcontractors' (Taş, 2020: 3). Erdoğan claims to be victimised and extends that status to the Turkish state and people, setting forth a division between patriot and enemy, victim and oppressor, the faithful versus the faithless, and Turkey versus the imperialist West – and these are projected onto history with a focus on the Ottoman past as the golden age (see Taş, 2020). In doing so, he co-opts and seeks to undermine those historically victimised by Turkey such as religious and ethnic minorities from Armenians to Kurds.

In terms of defining the enemy and calling for its eradication, the more threatened the Erdoğan government has become, the clearer its articulation of who its enemies are and the more literal and direct its calls and justifications for violence. In 2016, Erdoğan faced

a coup attempt by a faction of the army, which the government accused of allegiance to US-based cleric Fethullah Gülen. Following the coup attempt, the internal enemy became more explicit – the Gülen movement (referred to as FETÖ: Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü by the Turkish government). The idea that the state is targeted by a conspiracy became more palpable and accusations of sedition more pervasive and violent. When the coup failed overnight, and a state of emergency was set in place to allow the prosecution of the perpetrators, the category of the enemy of the state was inflated to include all critics and was used to silence and imprison opposition politicians, journalists and academics. The justification and populist spin given was based on the temporal template of claiming victimhood and projecting that onto history.

On 15 July 2017, President Erdoğan addressed the nation on the first anniversary of the failed coup (for a translated recording: see TRT world, 2017). The speech was given at a rally at the site of the Bosphorus Bridge, which, on the eve of the coup attempt, saw rebel troops kill 34 civilians (*BBC*, 2017). The bridge, which is central in connecting the city of 16 million people, was soon after renamed as 15 July Martyrs' Bridge. The location of the commemoration was highly symbolic, not only because of what had happened there a year prior, but also because the strategic importance of the bridge both in terms of infrastructure and metaphor. Standing next to the bridge, Erdoğan spoke about how the country is now connected to its historic victories, and how the coup has become as central an event as the founding of the Turkish republic. The symbolic deployment of a bridge in a temporal sense resonates in a country that is often described as a bridge between continents and cultures.

Erdoğan's speech follows the narrative form of historical victimhood. By going back and forth between talking about himself and the Turkish nation, he first blurs the lines between himself as a leader, the Turkish state, nation and people as, according to him, all were the target of the coup attempt. He paints a picture of collective victimhood in face of the coup and how unarmed civilian martyrs were killed – 'they were armed only with their flags and more importantly their faith'. Here, he begins to establish the equivalence between support of his leadership, Turkish nationalism and religious faith and to project meaning on the Turkish version of the 'us' and 'them' formulation.

Second, he projects the division between the victimised heroes ('us') and the defeated traitors ('them') on to a worldview focused on historical junctures. He celebrates the heroism and defiance that occurred that night and how ordinary people confronted tanks with their bare hands. 'I wish this bridge could talk to tell us about the heroism of that night', he said as he compares citizens' heroism to that of Turkish soldiers in the battle of Gallipoli – a foundational memory of Turkish nationalism when Ottoman forces fended off an attack by Allied forces during the First World War. In doing so, Erdoğan establishes the equivalence between the present and the past before he moves to discuss the future. He adds that, though Turkey lost martyrs, 'we saved the future . . . and gained our independence'. Third, he explains and elaborates on how Turks have been victimised and how that is part of the country's identity. Throughout Turkey's history, he stresses, 'we have always been tested by fire, by the attacks of our enemies, by evil forces . . . the treachery that we face unifies us'. The coup attempt is not the first attack against our nation, nor will it be the last – he concludes.

Clearly, the speech is representative of Erdoğan's broad discursive strategy: equate oneself to the people, claim the status of a victim under threat, establish a stark choice

between heroism and submission, project that onto past and future temporal terrains, and reiterate that one's leadership is the only way of achieving Turkish greatness. While the enemies of the people and the state are explicitly defined as the coup plotters, the accusations are implicitly extended to any critic. The designation of an enemy is not rhetorical but increasingly interpreted literally to fall under the jurisdiction of Turkey's anti-terrorism laws – evidence of the turn to authoritarianism in the country. Compared to the United States, the operationalisation of the victim narrative is more defined in Turkey. Erdoğan does not only rely on insinuations and metonymy, he explicitly names the Gülen movement (FETÖ) as an enemy of the state, and accuses it of sharing the same goals with other movements that are officially labelled as terrorist including the Islamic State group and the Kurdistan Workers' Party. However, the label terrorist has come to be extended to include vocal critics, who get persecuted under the same laws (Osborne, 2017).

Although relying on the same temporal narrative form, the difference between the use of victimhood by Trump and Erdoğan is in the degree to which those named as the victimisers, traitors, faithless and enemies are named, punished and persecuted. Finchelstein (2017) argues that one of the main elements that turns populism into neofascism is the move from 'a more or less generic rhetoric of an unidentified enemy (the elites, traitors, outsiders, etc)' (p. 28) to the articulation of an identifiable foe who is met with political violence. Of course, that also is facilitated by the kind of political system and culture an authoritarian leader is operating in. Needless to say, Erdoğan is able to use state institutions in the service of his rule in an easier way than in the United States, while in authoritarian states, like many Arab regimes, this can be achieved in a smoother way than in Turkey or the United States, as state institutions in most Arab countries are extensions of the ruling regimes and are in service of their rule. State bodies are thus committed to the operationalisation of narratives about the dangers of adversaries, whose physical elimination is said to be key to the health and survival of the nation and body politic.

Conclusion

Historical victimhood, I have argued, has dominated resurgent populist discourse with its claims that the people have been enduring victimhood for a long time, and that, like fateful junctures throughout history, today the leader will pivot the nation's trajectory into its authentic great path. Populist leaders promote their versions of a forked historical consciousness that views the present through the lens of a dramatic temporal formulation: a stark choice between the spectacular rise of the nation or its tragic decline. When they claim that the nation's or the community's victimhood is based on historical grievances, they project legitimacy and urgency on the divisive narrative. They intend to make people feel the magnitude of their alleged oppression today by contrasting it with a time that such oppression did not exist. They also want them to feel they have to do something about this historical wrong and so they portray the present as being as fateful as historic junctures were in the past. At the same time, populist leaders are interested in extending and sustaining that feeling of victimhood as much as possible in order to maintain their hold on power and that is why they present themselves as the embodiment of their supporters' hijacked agency (Kelly, 2020).

While claims to victimhood can be made by different political actors in a multitude of contexts, animating rhetoric with self-victimhood is a risky endeavour. It entrenches the idea of division in the social sphere between ‘us’ and ‘the enemy’. It fixates on an absolutist binary in society, consolidates the idea of an enemy of the people, and begins to sow the seeds for eliminating them. The chain of equivalence of binaries between the traitor and the patriot, the outsider and the native, is animated and brought to life through invoking the past and the future. In deploying historical victimhood, populist leaders target their opponents and critics in order to portray them as the people’s historical enemies, who are the root cause of the contemporary sense of victimhood. Populist leaders call on the public they address to eradicate the cause of their country’s or group’s imagined decline in order to undo alleged injustice and to re-make future greatness. They invite their supporters to project their sense of frustration and anger onto ‘the other’ and to imagine a future free of those to blame.

To reiterate, the discursive nodes of historical victimhood, as deployed by populist leaders, are the following: conflating the leader with the people, establishing a binary between us and them, and dwelling on how patriots have long been victimised and, therefore, how imperative it is for them to act now to change the course of future history. The idea of historical victimhood is what affectively glues together eclectic populist claims and what gives urgency to their message. They perpetuate forked historical consciousness by invoking several turning points in history and establishing a discursive chain of equivalence that maintains the structure of a juncture from the distant past to the present day – always putting themselves at the centre of these narratives and claiming to be their nation’s saviours from its enemies past, present and future.

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