Lilie Chouliaraki   Joanna Bale   January 22nd, 2025

How the far right weaponizes victimhood

From Nigel Farage's claims about two-tier policing, to Elon Musk's weaponization of the grooming gangs scandal, the far right portrays itself as a victim or as on the side of victims as a tool to promote its political ends. In this interview, **Joanna Bale** *asks* **Lilie Chouliaraki** *about how her book "Wronged" exposes how this rhetoric of victimhood is used by the powerful to amass even more power.*

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What events inspired you to write "Wronged," and how do you see its relevance in today's socio-political climate?

The idea for the book came up quite a few years ago, with the Brexit referendum and Trump's first election to the Presidency. What intrigued me was the paradox of very rich, very privileged people, disconnected and indifferent to the daily struggles of working people winning elections in the name of the oppressed and of the victims. One example is ex-PM Boris Johnson who, upon resigning for misleading Parliament over lockdown-breaking parties at Downing Street in 2021, he claimed that he was the "victim of a witch hunt". Another is Nigel Farage's claim that far-right rioters across the UK were victims of police discrimination due to their race and politics during their violent, Islamophobic "protests" in August 2023 riots – the "two-tier policing" argument.

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So, as I was doing other projects at the time and writing about borders, migrants and refugees, I started re-thinking the idea of victimhood. Because we usually think that victims are powerless and passive – like the migrants and refugees I was then writing about– and we reserve the language of victims for vulnerable individuals or marginalized groups who suffer injustices or trauma. But what does it mean when we hear powerful individuals claiming that they are victims and they do so to gain even more power, to dominate over others?

I wanted to explore that link between victimhood and power. And specifically, how victimhood is complicit with power, how it is appropriated as a linguistic weapon of the already privileged to gain even more power – and ultimately do nothing about the most vulnerable in society.

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Your primary argument is that victimhood is not a stable identity but a "contingent and malleable speech act". Please explain this in layman's terms.

We usually think of victimhood as something we carry inside us, as pain that is written in our souls and bodies. As something that comes from our histories and biographies and shapes our emotional core. In one way or another, this idea of victimhood profoundly speaks to the lived experience of all of us, but it leaves out an important dimension of victimhood. And this is the dimension of victimhood as speech and narrative that we use to describe ourselves. So, when I say "I am I traumatised" or "someone committed an injustice against me," I am communicating something about myself. Victimhood is a performance of who I am in public, and it is in this sense that I speak about it as "a malleable speech act."

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As a performance of speech, victimhood can certainly express our innermost truths and traumas. But, and this is the tricky part, it can also take many shapes and forms and can be used by anyone and everyone for their own purposes independently of their circumstances of harm and injury.

This is why, instead of asking "are you a victim?", it is more helpful to ask "are you vulnerable?" When we speak of vulnerability, we attend not to speech acts and identity claims but to social space and to social positions. Not what identity are you communicating but what is your place in society, and the social sciences are good at precisely this: producing credible maps of society in terms of socio-economic markers of class, gender, race, sexuality, ability, age etc. and establishing how those markers are systemically associated with specific types of harms. That, for instance, being poor and being a woman (and being non-white) exposes someone to levels of violence – poverty, misogynistic abuse, racial discrimination etc –not experienced in the same way by other socio-economic categories.

You also explore the populist weaponization of victimhood in the context of the Covid pandemic. How did this work?

I picked the covid-19 pandemic because, in the first wave (March-June 2020), the UK and the US, two of the world's richest countries, topped the global rankings for the fastest virus spread. And that shocking rate and number of deaths, suffering and grief posed a communication challenge for Trump and Johnson who were elected on the promise to protect the people from being "victimized" by their "enemies" – migration, the corrupt elites, the media etc.

Part of the answer is that they are liars but this is not enough. In fact, they combined a number of communicative strategies by which they either suppressed or reversed people's experiences of pain.

Firstly, we had the *denial* of the virus and a refusal to take measures. In February and early March 2020,both leaders denied the risks of covid-19 and went on with business as usual: handshakes, selfies, hugs with people, contradicting health experts and the like. What they cared about was to keep the economy going for as long as possible but this business-as-usual strategy, while countries around the world were swiftly going into lockdown, led millions of people into unsafe encounters

and spread the infection wide – approximately 30,000 and 36,000 lives, respectively in the US and the UK, would public measures been taken a couple of weeks earlier in March 2020.

Later, we had the *suppression* of the mass grief that followed the impact of the virus. The number of deaths were announced on a daily basis but neither of the two publicly acknowledged the trauma of grief, the shock and the fear that people felt during that period nor did they take responsibility for their mistakes. On the contrary, they sought to trivialize people's feelings and promote a cynical acceptance of mass deaths as something inevitable – remember Boris Johnson's "I must level with the British public, many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time"? Coupled with their lack of empathy, this aggressive performance of toughness and invincibility echoed a military rhetoric that treated serious illness as personal weakness and naturalized covid deaths as inevitable sacrifices in the "war" against the virus rather than grieving them as preventable and unnecessary tragedies – as indeed other national leaders did.
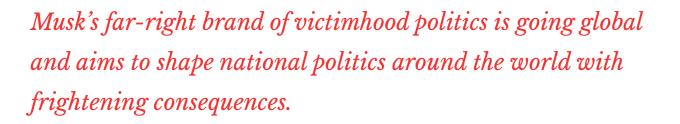
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Throughout the pandemic, both leaders also amplified an "infodemic", that is employed strategies of *obfuscation* that spread fake news, half-truths and emo-facts, which confused people's understanding of how the pandemic was managed – from Johnson's "we already have a fantastic NHS, fantastic testing systems and fantastic surveillance of the spread of disease" to Trump's promotion of ivermectin as a "wonder drug". All the while, while considering themselves the real victims of bad luck for having to lead during a major health emergency – recall Trump's lament that he was "sailing for an easy election" prior to the pandemic and Johnson's rhetoric of discomfort and regret for his difficult public health decisions during his term.

In your view, how have social media contributed to what you term the "weaponization" of victimhood?

In the book, I talk about the platformization of pain, which means that, once claims to victimhood travel through social media platforms, how pain is regulated and whose pain is amplified depends on the commercial calculus of each platform. And, as we all know, platforms tend to maximize the visibility of those claims that work best in their economy of attention – so they prioritize mainly claims of extreme emotion and outrage.

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The use of Elon Musk's X to amplify Trump's message in the recent US elections is a frightening example of this complicity between the business logic of the platform and the political agenda of the far Right. The two converged to consolidate and expand the reach of Trump's messages – and with them, they created a fertile context for an unprecedented spread of hate speech against migrants, the trans community, pro-choice groups etc. Musk's more recent interventions in UK politics, pretending to care for the victims of the "grooming gangs" scandal, is evidence that his far-right brand of victimhood politics is going global and aims to shape national politics around the world with frightening consequences.

It's not that social media have not done good for marginalized voices. Back in 2017,2020, BLM and MeToo turned global on then-Twitter. In MeToo, for instance, we saw how women's testimonies of suffering helped form new communities of alliance and solidarity and develop new languages of recognition – with hashtags like "MeToo" itself and "I believe her" "I'm with her" etc.

But when we speak about the politics of communicating pain and the languages of recognition in social media platforms, we need to be cautious and always ask questions like recognition on whose terms? With what benefit or at what cost? I think the recent mass migration from X to Bluesky as an alternative space of online deliberation suggests that publics do reflect on these questions and exercise agency by making meaningful decisions about their participation and voice.

The bigger point here is that an important part of problematizing the uses of victimhood in public discourse is precisely about sharpening our critique of the political economy of platforms. And, indeed, there is great work done in my field, Media and Communications, both around proposing evidence-based reforms in platform regulation; and, more deeply, around questioning the whole profit-driven architecture of platforms and proposing internet infrastructures and media platforms that incorporate an orientation towards the public good rather than being solely oriented towards private profit.

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