The Return of Blaming the Victim

written by Samuel Farber | December 3, 2025

In recent decades, the old notion of blaming the victims for causing the problems of racial minorities and other oppressed groups had receded somewhat as the political weight of these groups had apparently risen. This was especially the case after the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement had obtained concessions such as the DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) programs promoted by a significant number of corporations. Such modest advances had taken place among sections of the US population while other Americans were seething with resentment towards the supposedly favored racial and gender minorities.

This resentment greatly facilitated the growth of right-wing reaction and the decline of the advances made by oppressed groups in the United States under the hateful rule of Donald Trump. He has set the tone for the new blaming the victim offensive in the U.S. whether these are hardworking immigrants, racial minorities, and foreigners that Trump often attacks with a total lack of respect or even a minimum of decency.

Besides the aggression directed at oppressed groups, particularly undocumented immigrants and people of color, the rise of blaming the victim has had the less visible effect of creating a far more unfavorable environment for social and political self-reflection among the mass of the oppressed and exploited groups whose awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of their own community is a crucial, indispensable tool for radical, let alone revolutionary, democratic movements. However, this public self-reflection presents problems of its own. Among oppressed people—as well as among the left—it is often, and understandably, regarded as a potentially dangerous give away to the other side who might wield it against them.

Growing up as the youngest son of Polish Jewish immigrants to Cuba in the shadow of European Nazism, I understand very well this attitude. We were repeatedly warned by the elders in the Jewish community in Havana that criticism of Jews was to be kept exclusively within the Jewish community, out of the hearing of the “goyim.” (gentiles) This was mostly rooted in their history and fear of antisemitism and their belief that any public self-critical evaluation would inevitably be used by antisemites for their own purposes. A couple of decades ago, while discussing comedian Bill Cosby’s criticisms of the values and practices of the Black community (this was before the revelations of his sexual assaults on women), a Cuban Jewish relative told me that, in his view, the main problem was not whether Cosby was substantially right or wrong, but that he should not have discussed those issues before white audiences.

It is against this backdrop that the work of the Italian Jew Primo Levi is so unusual. Looking at reality squarely in the eye and ignoring the potential fallout of his critical approach to an extremely sensitive issue for the Jews, he richly documented the reactions of the victims of the Auschwitz concentration camp, of which he was also a victim, to the psychological and physical injuries that left a mark on them. He wrote how

The harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness…to collaborate: terror, ideological seduction, servile imitation of the victor, myopic desire for any power whatsoever, even though ridiculously circumscribed in space and time, cowardice, and, finally, lucid calculation aimed at eluding the imposed orders.

However, far from even remotely blaming the victims, Levi insisted on the critical distinction between the guiltless victims and their murderers, adding that to confuse victims and murderers "is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation or a sinister sign of complicity; above all, it is a service rendered (intentionally or not) to the negators of truth," while pointing out that the "greatest responsibility lies with the system, the very structure of the totalitarian state."

It is in that context that his biographer Ian Thomson (*Primo Levi. A Life*, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2003*)* pointed out that to survive, Levi had to steal. As Levi put it, "stealing from the Germans—blankets, oil, anything—was considered a matter of pride, especially if the prisoner was not caught." (162) And instead of piously moralizing and condemning from on high, Levi argued that any judgment should be entrusted "only to those who found themselves in similar circumstances and had the opportunity to test for themselves what it means to act in a state of coercion."

Primo Levi's profoundly humanist and analytical sharpness contrasts with Elie Wiesel's view that the Jewish Holocaust in its infinite record of martyrdom could not be subjected to historical analysis and compared to similar experiences suffered by other peoples. As political scientist Corey Robin put it, "more than anyone, Wiesel helped sacralize the Holocaust, making it a kind of theological event that stood outside history, 'the ultimate event, the ultimate history, never to be comprehended or transmitted,' was how he once put it." (*Jacobin*, July 6, 2016)

Moreover, while Levi did see the state of Israel as a "life-raft" of the Jewish people and a testament to their will to survive, he was very troubled by the Arab refugee problem and dismayed by the lack of interest shown in his work in Israel. Levi was problematic for the Israeli public because his books did not recommend life in Israel or some other redemptive solution to catastrophes such as Nazism. In addition, Levi sharply criticized Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and referred to Israel's Defense minister and military leader of that invasion, General Ariel Sharon, as a "hard, unscrupulous soldier." (416) Wiesel, for his part, as a Zionist supporter of that invasion, criticized Levi for his critical views on the conflict.

African Americans and Self-reflection

African Americans tend to share the same notion on the potential dangers of public self-criticism as my family did regarding any public criticism of Jewish Ashkenazi customs. The concern often expressed by many African Americans is based on the specific objective realities that they confront, such as, for example, the crude racism of right-wing social scientists espousing the shameful lie of the supposed genetic inferiority of Blacks, as well as the racism of supposedly liberal social scientists and opinion leaders who, pretending to address the problems of Black poverty and crime, often end up pointing at Black people themselves as the main cause and source of their problems.

An influential example of this insidious white liberal "blaming the victim" posture is Daniel Patrick Moynihan's 1960's thesis pointing at the "weakness" of the Black family—especially single motherhood and desertion—as a major cause of poverty among African Americans. Inverting causation, Moynihan did not seriously consider that such problems–to the extent that they were real, which has been a highly controverted issue– could be the result, and not the cause of poverty and discrimination. His arguments provided the ideological justification for ignoring the economics of racism and for the shrinking of the welfare state, even though he actually advocated its selective expansion, by changing the subject and shifting the public emphasis from Black people's long history

of economic and social oppression and exploitation to the supposed social deficiencies of the African American community.

The Resurgence of "Culture" and Blaming the Victim

The right-wing approach to social reality was presented by the current vice president J. D. Vance back in 2016 with the very successful publication off his Hillbilly Elegy. A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis (New York: Harper. An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers). At the time, the author was certainly writing as a self-declared conservative, but he was not yet the vile extreme right-wing vice-presidential candidate who proclaimed that the hard-working Haitian immigrants in Springfield, located in his home state of Ohio, were stealing pets to later eat them. In 2016, he was a more respectable conservative who, while recognizing Trump's supposed positive contributions to American politics such as his disdain for elites (262), also had enough reservations about him that led him to vote, not for Trump, but for an independent candidate for President in the 2016 elections. At the time, Vance dutifully criticized the welfare system (sharply reduced after the Republican Congress and Democratic president Bill Clinton transformed it in 1996), but he simultaneously criticized conservatives for not realizing that the welfare system had diminished much human suffering including that of his own "hillbilly" grandparents. (261)

But who or what was responsible for the bad situation of poor "hillbilly" whites in places like the rural Kentucky where he was born? Here, Vance joined "liberal" Daniel Patrick Moinyhan in declaring "culture" the main culprit responsible for all these problems. In that context, Vance endorsed Moynihan's declaration that "the central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society." (262) And while Vance demonstrated some ambivalence about the white Appalachian culture he was complaining about, he did not flinch from describing it as afflicted by drunkenness, drug consumption, violence, and the inability to hold on to a job, much less aspire to be promoted to a higher position at work.(40-46) Evidently, as Vance saw it, the world view of "hillbillies" was thoroughly pervaded by fatalism.

To undo the effects of "hillbilly" culture and its fatalism, Vance adhered to an extreme individualism rooted in the attitudes of his grandparents who had an "almost religious faith in hard work and the American dream." For them hard work mattered more than the wealth and privilege of people they disdained. As his grandma put it, "never be like these fucking losers who think the deck is stacked against them. You can do anything you want to." (35-36)

According to Vance, two experiences were critical in determining his successful path in life aside from his grandparents' influence. One was joining the Marine Corps that, on one hand, greatly reinforced his existing "hillbilly" patriotism (156-7) rooted in his grandparents' teaching him that "we live in the greatest country in the world" (190). But, on the other hand, as he describes the Marine Corps, it was a school of military discipline as well as a kind of "life disciplinarian" that taught its members even how to get the kind of car that would be the best buy and forced recruits to take mandatory classes about balancing a checkbook, saving, and investing. The Marines also showed him, just like his grandmother taught him, to excise, like a surgeon does a tumor, the feeling that choices don't matter, a feeling that according to Vance, is common among white workers. (177)

Vance also received another very important source of institutional help from Yale Law School who offered him a financial package that exceeded his "wildest dreams." And, as he pointed out, "that wasn't because of anything that I'd done or earned—it was because I was one of the poorest kids in school." (176-77) Vance reflected at length of his experience at Yale citing a *New York Times* article reporting that the most expensive schools are paradoxically cheaper for low-income students. Vance was star struck as he found out that Yale Law School had educated several Supreme Court Justices and the then secretary of state Hillary Clinton. Not least, Vance also had the opportunity to be

mentored by Law School professor Amy Chua, of tiger mother fame. In short, he had met and got to know elite America.

Considering his experiences at Yale, Vance asked himself why he was the only graduate from his high school to make it to the Ivy League and why people like him were so poorly represented in elite institutions. (198-207) But in none of his reflections did he question the key individualist notion that people could rise by their own individual effort something that was clearly not his case considering Yale's affirmative action efforts to benefit him as a low-income white student. At the time, Yale also had an affirmative action program to benefit racial minorities, a fact that goes unmentioned by Vance. As it eventually turned out, in 2023 the conservative Supreme Court, which included three right-wing justices appointed by Trump in his first term, declared affirmative action unconstitutional in its Students for Fair Admissions versus Harvard decision.

In addition to the color-blind pretentions of this book, Vance was allergic to a fundamental analysis of the socio-economic order that prevails in the United States. Take for example his analysis of the crisis in Middletown, the Ohio city to which he and his family moved after leaving Kentucky. This is a Middletown blighted by poverty across racial barriers and substantially decayed public facilities including even parks. According to Vance, Middletown used to have a very busy downtown with active shopping centers, restaurants, and bars, but by the time Vance published his book, "downtown Middletown was little more than a relic of industrial glory with broken windows lining the heart of downtown." (50)

Vance did identify the principal cause of Middletown's decay to the sharp decline of Middletown's principal employer, Armco Kawasaki Steel. After initially attributing the few hours people work in Middletown to laziness, Vance steps back and recognizes that there is not much work available because the Armcos of this world are going out of business. (57-58) But he did not ask himself what allowed those companies to disappear and leave people unemployed. Was it an act of nature like the weather that you can do little or nothing about? Or was it the product of a system where an unplanned anarchic process of corporations searching for the highest rate of profit has little if any room left for the security and needs of working people? It was the unstinted effort and support of his grandparents that according to Vance saved him from the undesirable destiny that affected most of his classmates in Middletown. But did that prove that it was responses like the individual effort of his grandparents to save him from disaster that could generally be counted on to save people from economic and social disaster? Or was it rather that economic disasters, while they are uniform in the force of their impact, are less uniform in their individual effects because even the relatively minor differences among families and individuals may allow some to avoid or escape the worst effects of a crisis? It is the depth of a crisis and its inevitable effects on most people that is properly the principal subject of public policy, not the individual capacity of a few to escape its worst effects.

Undoubtedly, the profound crisis of deindustrialization and the abandonment of its victims by the Democratic and Republican parties alike, except perhaps for some programs that place a band aid where major surgery is required, demoralized some people to such an extent that they could not even take advantage of the rare opportunity to stay at a promising job. But these attitudes will not significantly change if the objective situation remains the same because even if some take advantage of the infrequent existing opportunities, other people will replace the previously unsuccessful people in the ranks of the hopeless. Thus, Vance's premise is misleading when he states that his 2016 book is about "the lives of real people when the industrial economy goes south. It is about reacting to bad circumstances in the worst way possible. It's about a culture that increasingly encourages social decay instead of counteracting it." (7) This is a not too subtle way to "blame the victims" instead of the awful circumstances that systematically produce failure and demoralization.

It is worth noting in this context that the millions of people who died and were injured and maimed

by wars, do not constitute a cause of the horrendous decay caused by war. They are instead an awful symptom of them. The relatively greater willingness of conservative opinion in the United States to offer aid to veterans who have illnesses such as PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) is not only due to patriotism but to the fact that the injuries to be remedied are totally transparent in their causes and consequences while this is not the case for the victims of the Schumpeterian destruction caused by capitalism. The impersonality of market forces reinforced by market fetishism hides our perception of material reality.

Moreover, Vance did not consider that even culture is not a fixed phenomenon as it appears to him in Appalachia. There is such a thing as cultural change. For example, Spain and the Republic of Ireland have been societies where Catholic cultures and the conservative precapitalist values they promoted predominated for centuries. Yet, during the last seventy years they have become substantially different cultures. Major economic development and political changes played the most important role in these processes. In these two countries cultural change was the effect of major economic and political changes, not the cause of them.

Vance and the Politics of Resentment

Where does the radical individualism of people like J.D. Vance lead when it inevitably fails to succeed for millions of people? I would suggest that in the absence of a radically progressive collective alternative based on the widespread mobilization from below of working people, extreme individualism will likely lead to a particular kind of politics of resentment. This politics leads to the implicit if not explicit conclusion that the problem is not that there is something wrong with the social order itself but instead with many privileged people who have the wrong values and politics but nevertheless occupy positions of power in that social order. At bottom this attitude unconsciously, if not consciously, cries out with the popular Spanish language expression “quitate tu para ponerme yo” (“you should step aside so I can occupy your place”), rather than changing the class and hierarchical structure of the social order to benefit most people. This view of the world comes up in Vance’s own analysis of why Obama was unpopular with many people. While Vance wrongly dismisses racism as one of the causes of anti-Obama sentiment, he does suggest other credible reasons for why people dislike the first and so far, the only African American president in U.S. history. As Vance points out, Obama is brilliant, wealthy, self-confident and speaks well, and is a constitutional law professor. But, according to Vance, he “came on the scene right as so many people in my community began to believe that the modern meritocracy was not built for *them…*Barack Obama strikes at the heart of our deepest insecurities.” (191) Elsewhere in this volume, Vance is even more explicit when he concedes that “for my entire life, I’d harbored resentment at the world”; he was mad at his parents, mad at his clothes, having no car, and living in a small house among other indignities. But eventually, he began to appreciate how lucky he had been for being born “in the greatest country on earth,” and being able to enjoy every modern convenience, and the love of his family. (173)

Progressive Self-criticism and its Problems – The Case of Richard Wright

It is precisely in light of the real obstacles that African Americans, like other discriminated-against groups, face as an oppressed minority in engaging in the process of self criticism, that the work of Richard Wright (1908-1960) merits special attention. A prominent African American intellectual and writer from the 1930s until his early death in 1960, he engaged some of the most important intellectual and political currents of his time. In 1932, he joined the American Communist Party from which he broke in 1944, because of its oppressive discipline and politics. However, he remained, broadly speaking, a person on the left, although with a recurring tendency to side with the West in the Cold War. He also became involved with existentialism, and eventually moved after World War II, like so many other Black American writers and artists of his time to France, where he developed a

personal friendship with Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. In 1948, he collaborated with Sartre in the leadership of the short-lived Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire (RDR), an organization that advocated a revolutionary and democratic socialism, which rejected the Stalinism of the French CP and the reformism of the French socialists, and the politics of both Washington and Moscow. Profoundly identified with Black Africa, Wright also became involved in the anti-colonial movement of the postwar period in support of Pan Africanism, having become a friend of George Padmore, a major figure in Pan African politics, who had left the American Communist Party in 1934 after playing an important role in the Communist International.

It is in his political writings on Africa, where he lived in 1953 as a guest of Kwame Nkrumah—the leader of the anti-colonial movement against Britain that led to the independence of Ghana—that Wright's criticism is most acute. In the impressions and reflections of this visit, which he recorded in his 1954 book *Black Power*, he registered his strong critique and opposition to tribalism (as well as African religion and superstition), not so much because of their political character and consequences, but because of the magical, irrational, and antiscientific beliefs and behavior they fostered. For Wright, an individual described by Cornel West as a true representative of the Enlightenment, the Pan-African anti-colonial movement had to open the path to an African modernity built on a "secular religion" that held people together as they refused to imitate West and East.

Wright could justly be criticized for making little if any effort to understand the causes and belief systems of tribalism in its own complex terms—after all, to understand the causes and nature of a body of beliefs and practices does not necessarily lead to their justification or support. However, he did not "blame the victim," but the very opposite. Thus, he unambiguously asserted in *Black Power* that absent colonialism, the Africans "could have created conditions much better…if they had been left alone" and concludes that "…colonialism develops the worst qualities of character of both the imperialist and its hapless victim." Aware of the racist paternalism of colonial rule, and notwithstanding his belief in scientific education, progress, and modernity, Wright insightfully described the fate of the elite educated African living in the European white world: although "he will have a place of honor, that place will be with the lower and subject races" where he will soon know "that he has to avoid saying certain things; for example, if it's known that he's a nationalist, he will surely not pass his bar examinations. Inhibition sets in and he must choose whether he's to be among the favored or the scorned."

True to his critical mind, Wright also expressed his skepticism about the concessions that Nkrumah, his host, had granted to the British to obtain Ghana's independence, not because Wright thought that there was anything improper in doing so, but because of its political consequences in terms of the divisions and demoralization they created in the nationalist camp. Yet, Wright's own political approach is tinted with a degree of left elitism and politics from above. As Cornel West notes in his introduction to the very valuable collection that he compiled under the title *Black Power: Three Books from Exile* (Harper Perennial, Modern Classics, 2008), which includes *Black Power* as well as *The Color Curtain* and *White Man, Listen*, Wright called on Nkrumah to act as a kind of national commander insisting that he "improvise, industrialize for peace, service and production and 'to free minds from mumbo-jumbo.'" And while claiming to oppose any kind of military dictatorship, he also called for a "firm social discipline," of "hardness" and "coldness" that builds a "bridge between tribal man and the twentieth century." (West, XI)

It is worth noting that W. E. B. Dubois, the highly influential Black sociologist and thinker, was elitist too, with his emphasis on the "talented tenth" of the black community, and his harsh treatment of the illiterate and uneducated black masses as living in "dumb misery" and "childlike-ness." although much more explicitly so than Wright. But as Aldon Morris insisted in his book *The Scholar Denied. W.E.B. Dubois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*, (University of California Press, 2015), Dubois explained this misery as an outcome of white oppression, which is the same spirit in which Richard

Wright approached the matter. Nevertheless, this points to the risk that any self-critical evaluation of oppressed communities runs the risk of getting into an elitist mode despite coming from an ultimately progressive perspective.

In his Black American centered fiction, Wright's critical assessments are also a mix of brilliantly stark and questionable characterizations. Based on the "naturalist" and "urban realist" tradition he adopted in his literary writing, where paradoxically, considering his rationalism in politics, he also incorporated an element of existentialism and a sui generis kind of nihilism. As in the case of his novel *The Outsider*—he presents Black America as he sees it without adornment or idealization. In the remarkable *Black Boy,* an autobiographical novel full of contained fury in its scalding exposé of American racism (which he also exposed in his short stories in *Uncle Tom's Children*), he laments too what he sees as

> the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and shallow was even our despair.

Wright's characterization was meant to respond to "those who felt that Negroes led so passional an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, flights, fears, our frenzy under pressure." (45)

In his fiction, Wright avoids exploring the possibilities of Black personal and/or collective resistance and transformation. His harsh characterization of Black Americans was denounced, by James Baldwin among others, as stereotyped, as ignoring their complexities as full human beings with contradictory good and bad traits, as capable of agency or intelligence. Some critics fault him for his preachiness and didacticism, particularly in his famous *Native Son*, which he wrote when he was still a member of the Communist Party, for his introducing Communism and Communists into the drama from the outside instead as growing organically from the story itself, and imposing it as it were from the top, as the guiding light of goodness and the noble.

However valid, these criticisms do not detract from the overall artistic merit and integrity of Wright's uneven but great oeuvre. His work continues to be an exemplary attempt to look at one's community without blindfolds. It is also an example of the risks and obstacles in surmounting problems of critical self-evaluation: it is difficult to maintain a critical view of one's own oppressed community without falling into an unduly harsh or negative perspective that besides possibly providing ammunition to enemies, contributes to demoralization and powerlessness rather than the development of the self-confidence necessary to fight back. It is likely, as the critic Robert A. Bone has argued, that the "profound disgust" scarcely acknowledged by the conscious self that Wright felt towards "the self-limiting tendencies in Negro life" led him to underestimate his black heritage.

Conclusion – Self-Criticism and Opposing the System

Self-criticism is an indispensable tool for social movements. This becomes evident particularly in revolutionary situations where the future fate of the oppressed community is at stake, when it becomes necessary to adopt a critical stance and act against drug addiction and drug traffic, alcoholism, widespread corruption, petty crime and other social ills afflicting people if for no other reason that they are true obstacles—through the fears and profound demoralization that these ills often perpetuate in the communities of the oppressed–to the struggle for liberation. This has been the road taken by revolutionaries like Malcolm X and the Algerian Ali-La-Ponte, who not only transformed himself by abandoning his life as a small-time hustler but, as accurately described in the film *The Battle of Algiers*, led the struggle to clean the Casbah of crime and drugs as a condition

of the success of the Algerian revolutionary struggle against French colonialism.