

the attention of American élites, the response of the latter was nothing remotely like a rejection of acquisitive and technological values. Warwick's reflections here do not help him to explain why Britain was ultimately drawn more powerfully by the appeal of "hierarchies" than "markets," for any satisfactory explanation he could offer was already available, to be found within his discussion of British history and culture, and was not advanced by these conjectures. One is led to conclude that Warwick wished to find what he considered a convincing theoretical basis for fulfilling his ambition of rigor in "social science explanation," lacking which he would be left with an argument pretty close to the old culturalism.

What the book offers is a conscientiously researched study which usefully surveys several approaches to social, political, and economic problems. Warwick's effort to go beyond this and provide a unifying interpretation does not come off as well, or contain much that is original. But this is not fatal to his work. He aims for both "analysis" and "synthesis," and does a good job of the former. He also includes a number of relevant observations, such as that the British aristocracy, unlike the French, never completely isolated itself from the rest of society, and that the task of managing an empire greatly influenced the resurgence of the aristocratic ethos. He notes that although twentieth-century Britain has seen "the slow unraveling of the nineteenth-century compact," the very slowness is testimony to the compact's continuing appeal. He believes that "man is a profoundly social animal" who "obeys authority more often than not," and remarks astutely: "Usually unwilling to participate in general strikes, he seldom hesitates to participate in wars, where he has a great deal more to lose."

In fact, Warwick's basic position resembles good culturalist explanations of the past. He seems to have a fairly clear

idea of how and why the British got to where they did. Near the end of the book he says that "the more organic and hierarchical values represented by the aristocracy possessed an appeal unmatched by acquisitive individualism," and adds: "Those values were not created anew; they had been around for a very long time."

A Burkean conservative could hardly have said it better.

### ***Victims on the March***

JOHN ATTARIAN

***A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character***, by Charles J. Sykes, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. xiv + 290 pp. \$22.95.

A MAN WITH A 60-INCH WAIST threatens to sue a McDonald's restaurant, claiming discrimination because its seats cannot accommodate him. Fired for embezzling \$2,000 from the government and then gambling it away, an F.B.I. agent is reinstated after a court rules his flair for gambling a "handicap" protected by law. Such episodes seem so grotesque that only a satirist could invent them, but they are real, part of the national mania for victimism witheringly criticized in Charles J. Sykes's timely book. The quest for victim status and the benefits it confers is absorbing more and more Americans who have collapsed from self-reliant pioneers and yeomen into self-pitying "victims" whining that "it's not my fault." As Sykes observes:

Paradoxically, this don't-blame-me permissiveness is applied only to the self, not to others; it is compatible with an ideological puritanism that is notable for its shrill

demands of psychological, political, and linguistic correctness. The ethos of victimization has an endless capacity not only for exculpating one's self from blame, washing away responsibility in a torrent of explanation — racism, sexism, rotten parents, addiction, and illness — but also for projecting guilt onto others.

Our national pity party has spawned a metastasizing roster of “rights” and grievances, and litigation has soared accordingly, with 250,000 suits filed in federal courts in 1990 — there were fewer than 100,000 in 1960. Partly as a consequence of this greater legal threat, Americans are increasingly shying away from risk of any kind.

The cutting edges of victimism are the feminist, civil rights, and political correctness movements. Here matters are nightmarish indeed. “Racism” is invoked to explain every setback and excuse every misdeed by minorities, thus tragically retarding their progress by discouraging responsible behavior. Radical feminists claim victimization as a result of advertising that features bikini-clad women, and broaden sexual abuse to include everything from unwanted touches and kisses to rape. On college and university campuses, sensitive “victim” groups menace free speech; as Sykes wisely notes, “Once feelings are established as the barometer of acceptable behavior, speech (and, by extension, thought) becomes only as free as the most sensitive group will permit.”

How did our national character disintegrate so shamefully from a pioneer stoicism to an infantile readiness to sue over female-only reducing programs at diet clinics or a bad haircut violating one's “right to enjoy life”? While Tocqueville long ago noted Americans' predilection for “brooding over advantages they do not possess,” victimism essentially springs from our attitude toward pain, adversity, and happiness. Here, Sykes argues, two synergistic de-

velopments have been crucial: the decline of religion and the rise of psychotherapy.

Premodern bourgeois society, he says, was grounded in strong character, nurtured by “Protestantism, with its emphasis on salvation and self-restraint,” and families that nurtured sturdy personalities. Stoicism permeated the old order. “Nothing, perhaps, separates modern man from his forebears more definitively than his attitude toward adversity.” Adversity was assumed, and one's goal was not a fun life but a good one. Far from being a mere opium of the masses, premodern religion was demanding, recognizing evil, holding individuals responsible for their deeds, calling them to self-improvement. When religion declined, the stoic world view grounded in it also declined, as scientific and technological progress made people less willing to accept suffering.

As religion waned, psychotherapy waxed, assiduously peddled by therapists with an obvious interest in persuading people of their victimness. Therapists made extravagant assertions of what people are entitled to — love, money, fulfillment, sexual ecstasy — thus inflating expectations beyond reason. Setbacks of any kind emerged as cosmic affronts, as unfair victimization demanding redress.

With the rise of victimism, restraints on behavior lapsed. After the appearance of Theodor Adorno's influential *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), which Sykes sharply criticizes, self-restraint and respect for authority were deemed “authoritarian,” hence pathological. Sin vanished (oddly, Sykes doesn't mention Karl Menninger's *Whatever Became of Sin?* [1973]), displaced by a sense that we are without free will. Hence, criminals are seen as blameless victims who aren't guilty, just sick.

In the 1960s and 1970s victimism leaped from therapy to politics. William

Ryan's *Blaming the Victim* (1971), which Sykes roundly and rightly damns, made wholesale charges of racism, absolved "victims" from responsibility, and branded attempts to hold people accountable as "blaming the victim," a devastating phrase that haunts discourse to this day. After the Black Power and feminists movements came "the raucous parade of gays, Native Americans, the elderly, the handicapped, consumers, children, animal-rights activists, and environmentalists," all of whom shared "a passion for litigation and for the shrill rhetoric of unlimited demand."

Sykes's focus on trendy psychotherapy and the politics of civil rights and feminism is sound as far as it goes, but is far from being a complete explanation of victimism. More a work of journalism than scholarship, *A Nation of Victims* has the failings of its virtues. To be sure, Sykes's journalism background gives him a keen eye for the telling, epitomizing anecdote and produces a brisk, readable account of our problem, thick with news items, but the historical and intellectual background is thin and patchy.

He rightly asserts the decline of religion and argues that this is the root of the problem, but far too briefly; he would have profited by drawing on such works as James Turner's *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (1985), by discussing religion's further decay in this century and by noting that religion is now often a mere variant of therapy, no longer promoting stoicism.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, the full range of the consequences of secularization for national character and their contribution to our obsession with victimness seems to have escaped Sykes. He rightly but only very briefly notes that victimism presupposes determinism, and he neglects to mention the crucial takeover of academe, and intellectual circles in general, by the deterministic ideas of Marx, Engels, and others, which created a climate of opin-

ion conducive to victim-mongering. The central conflict of determinism versus free will is treated all too briefly.

Also, infected by determinism and nihilism, post-World War II literature has failed dismally at producing moral examples and heroes, instead portraying people as puny "anti-heroes," victims, or worse.<sup>2</sup> The same sickness of soul permeates movies, music, and art. As life imitates art, in that culture informs as well as expresses a society's world view, culture's engrossment in victims and depravity has surely encouraged victimism in our real life. Yet it goes unmentioned, as does the media's promotion of victim-mongering causes.

Psychotherapists deserve Sykes's criticisms, but he misses the truth that they did not act alone. The striving for a secular, materialist utopia is protean and its contribution to victimism many-sided. Inflated expectations and childish intolerance of difficulty and discomfort owe at least as much to our search for paradise through affluence—present already in the 1920s, greatly intensified after World War II, and (as Aldous Huxley noted as early as 1945)<sup>3</sup> goaded by advertising — as they do to therapists. In an incredible oversight, Sykes doesn't mention the corrupting role of consumerism at all.

Also, the New Deal and the Great Society promoted victimism, predicated as they were on the belief that succoring victims is government's proper task, and propelled by the left's utopian conviction that paradise can be legislated. Their entitlement programs and lucrative careers for "helping" professionals, activists, and politicians gave mighty incentives to manufacture "victims." Indeed victimism is the logical result of secular humanism's omnipotent welfare state.

Victimism, hence, is not merely or even mainly the child of the liberal sociological and psychological theories of the 1960s and 1970s, but rather the logical

culmination of a long and broad process of dissolution of principles that were once our backbone. By the 1980s victimism was telling multitudes what they were already, after long immersion in a character-corroding secularized world, disposed to hear.

Then, too, the role of events goes ignored. The confidence-shattering experiences of World War I and of the Great Depression; World War II with its frightful atrocities; the traumas of the Vietnam War; the economic convulsions of the 1970s; our soaring crime and violence—all this mass irrationality and sinfulness doubtless made victimism a far easier sell than it would have been in an earlier America.

As to the consequences of victim-mongering, Sykes focuses too narrowly on controversial race and gender issues, and fails to grasp the larger danger: that our weakened moral character is the culprit in our much-bewailed decline. A people engrossed in grievances and concocting rationalizations for failure inevitably flees from challenges and difficult but necessary tasks, demands little of itself, and delivers still less. Mediocrity, slackness, and incompetence pervade everything from education to childrearing to governance to work of all kinds.

To combat victimism Sykes suggests the following: hold people responsible; treat them as citizens and not as clients of an entitlement state; contain litigation by capping awards, requiring filers of frivolous suits to pay costs, and limiting legal definitions of victimization; return to *civitas* (a sense of membership in and responsibilities to a community) and *caritas* (“a sober and respectful affection”); set examples of virtue; have “a moratorium on blame.” “In short, Americans need to *lighten up*.” These measures will help, but victimism will never disappear until the underlying secular dogmas of determinism, solipsism, and utopia

are overturned.

Also, Sykes’s prescriptions stress fashionable complaints about a declining sense of community, but it is doubtful that communitarian scolding will avail us much or that self-obsessed “victims” will pull up their socks for society’s sake. A firmer motivation for maturity and stoicism is insuring self-respect in this life and salvation in the next. If a religious collapse has caused this disease, then a religious revival is the cure—and not because religion is socially useful, but because it teaches us how human beings are meant to live.

But for all the shortcomings, Sykes’s concern for the sturdiness of our national character is long overdue. He is saying things that need saying, and he says them with courage and common sense. While it is far from being a definitive book, *A Nation of Victims* is a pioneering and on the whole worthy one, and forceful enough perhaps to help jolt us back to our senses.

1. As noted, e.g., by Richard John Neuhaus in “When Bad Things Happen to Good Religion,” *National Review*, November 10, 1989, 52-54, his review of Harold Kushner’s *Who Needs God?* 2. See John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York, 1978) and Bruce Bawer, *Diminishing Fictions: Essays on the Modern American Novel and its Critics* (St. Paul, 1988), especially the title essay. 3. See *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York, 1945), 219, 251, et al. See also Vance Packard, *The Waste Makers* (1960), especially chapters 15, 17, 19, 20.

## Vintage Chamberlain

WILLIAM H. PETERSON

***The Turnabout Years: America’s Cultural Life, 1900-1950***, by John Chamberlain, *Ottawa, Ill.: Jameson Books, 1991. xviii + 254 pp. (paper \$12.95).*

FOR SOCIETY and the individual, life is full of turnabouts. In his 1982 autobiography A