Absolutely Sovereign Victims: Rethinking the Victim Movement

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IN THIS CONTRIBUTION, AN ATTEMPT WILL BE MADE TO RETHINK THE EMERGENCE AND subsequent development of what could be called the victim movement, or indeed the victim culture that has crystallized during the latter half of the twentieth century. I hope to be able to argue that, in the wake of World War II, a wide variety of elements came together to create a new form of life, one of whose manifestations is a pervasive victim culture. At the heart of this newly emerged form of life resides a radical desire for, or will to, absolute personal sovereignty, along with a radical desire for or will to absolute control. This form of life and the desire and will that fuel it (however imaginary or illusory this desire and will may be) are neither homogenous nor monolithic. They are shot through with contradiction and sheer agony.

The historical process that saw the gradual crystallization of this form of life started during and immediately after World War II. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the process was completed. This essay begins with reflections on events that took place in a small European country around that time (i.e., 2000 and 2001) that seem to be unrelated to the emergence and development of a victim culture. Yet a connection exists between the events there and the ultimate crystallization, at about the same time, of a thoroughly pervasive victim culture throughout much of what used to be known as Western democracies. Both are manifestations of a new and agony-filled form of life that, by 2000, had been well over five decades in the making. The reader is asked to bear with me during the exploration of a scare about traffic safety in Belgium, before stepping back in time to World War II for an analysis of the origins of a new form of life: control society.

A Scare about Traffic Safety

Around the turn of the twenty-first century, much of the Belgian press became saturated, if not dominated, by reports replete with allegations of lamentably poor levels of traffic safety on Belgian roads. Statistics on deaths and injuries following traffic accidents are published annually, but in that fateful year (2001) something akin to a scare took hold of the press and everyday conversations. Very palpable for weeks on end, the scare prompted some academics and commentators to analyze

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the phenomenon (e.g., Lippens 2002). One element is worth reviewing here. Most press reports remained riveted by the topic of traffic safety and argued forcefully for the nationwide introduction and implementation of measures some considered to be draconian (e.g., mechanical and infrastructural speed-limitation initiatives, severe punishment for traffic offenses, and so on). Similarly, conversations around breakfast tables and water coolers largely duplicated such arguments. One local authority in a provincial market town decided to hold a local referendum on a very thorough local plan that was replete with measures such as pedestrians-only zones in the town center, prolific use of speed humps and ramps, one-direction traffic, zones with speed limits, etc. Many a local town planner or councilor, in the heat of the national debate about traffic safety, must have felt quite confident about the outcome of the referendum. And yet voters rejected the plan. Alone inside the polling booth, the majority of voters reminded themselves of the benefits of having accessible city and shopping centers, of being able to rush to points A and B when necessary, and of road networks that allow for the free and undisturbed flow of traffic. We have no way of knowing whether the minority that voted for the plan were those who had railed against Belgium’s traffic safety at work and at home, while those who voted against the plan were those who remained silent during those heated debates. But that was probably not the case. The debate over traffic safety raged extensively and generated intense heat. However, a significant majority in that town rejected the “draconian” plan. A sizable element of the population must have been genuinely worried about or even shocked by the level of traffic incidents—to the point of drawing principled conclusions and heatedly arguing for draconian measures—while also seriously desiring easy accessibility, speed, and unfettered flow in all matters of mobility. In other words, many people must have wanted to have their cake and eat it too. Little in this human ... all too human characteristic (to evoke one of Nietzsche’s phrases) surprises us. Human beings are much less principled than is often assumed or believed. Under particular historical conditions, this unprincipled dimension of the human condition surges forward in everyday life, in thought and in practice. Such a surge became noticeable most recently in the age of late modernity. Indeed, it is more than noticeable. In late modernity, unprincipled thought and action have come to occupy the center of a new and rather dominant form of life whereby individuals are beginning to exhibit, even live a desire for, or will to radically absolute sovereignty. This desire and will do not tolerate principle. They are about eating cakes and having them too.

In my view, this form of life (also a phrase with Nietzschean antecedents) has had a crucial impact on the emergence and subsequent evolution of a victim culture, or even a victim movement. In what follows, I shall attempt to sketch the outlines of this process of emergence and evolution. The process, I believe, began during and immediately after the end of World War II. The victim movement did not significantly manifest itself before the second half of the 1970s, i.e., the decade marked by the gradual crumbling away (as authors such as Jürgen Habermas argue)
of the state’s legitimacy. But the origins of the movement can and should be traced to a prior period. The experience of World War II was crucially important, though not in immediately obvious ways. In short, the victim movement originated in the emergence and crystallization, during and just after World War II, of a new form of life (control society) that was marked by a desire for or will to absolute personal sovereignty. This form of life, in the wake of the war, gradually came to occupy the core of everyday life and culture in most Western democracies. Subsequent interlinked developments, such as the emergence of a pervasive consumer culture and an almost obsessive preoccupation with precaution, continued to shape and reshape the nature and reach of this form of life and its many manifestations, including the victim movement. Attention will be paid to various aspects of this ever-modulating form of life, such as the unprincipled sense of ineradicable ambivalence and the self-perpetuating agony that interpenetrates it.

**A New Form of Life: Control Society**

In 1990, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze published a short essay (translated into English in 1995) on what he called “control society.” Reading and commenting upon Foucault’s later work, Deleuze argued that the old disciplinary society was gradually being replaced. In the new one, the focus of governmentality no longer rested on the regular and systematic (i.e., disciplined) production of normalized and orderly (i.e., disciplined) subjectivities. In other words, wrote Deleuze, governance is no longer primarily about the disciplined production of discipline. It is no longer about the production and imposition of “order words” (i.e., words that command, order, and structure) that are then supposed to structure and over-code, if not directly determine, the whole field of thought and action. Instead, in control society governance is about the production of a never-ending stream of mere “passwords,” which are produced in a bewildering number of situations and locations. They regulate access to these situations and locations according to a never-ending, always modulating, and equally bewildering number of codes, rationales, and logics. A control society, then, is a form of life in which all situations and locations operate according to their own passwords, i.e., operative codes that they generate and circulate, and that, from time to time, are shared across locations and situations. There is precious little in the way of overarching order words in control societies, perhaps aside from the code that says, “there shall be no overarching order word.” There is neither an overarching center from which such an overarching order word might be produced, nor toward which any productive process of governance would be orientated.

Control society is a form of life that is marked by the production and circulation of ever-modulating passwords of control. As a form of life, it cuts across demographic segments, class formations, or any other category of division we might consider. Its logic of operation works in locations and situations across the entire spectrum of the field of thought and action. It works during board meetings, in police canteens,
in trade unions, around breakfast tables, during the weekly walk in the park, and in the shopping mall down the street. Like Foucault, Deleuze situates the emergence of this form of life within the context of consumption-driven neoliberal societies and their culture of do-it-yourself responsibilization. The origins of this form of life can be traced back much further in time, but for now I will outline two crucially important features of a control society.

First, at the heart of this form of life is a radical desire for, or will to absolute sovereignty, which exists only in the imagination. One could never be absolutely sovereign, or absolutely independent. Indeed, those who desire absolute sovereignty, or absolute independence, are immediately and unavoidably subjected to, or dependent on, various conditions, such as the condition of their own desire and will, or the conditions that make their own desire and will, or any of the imagined aims and objects of that desire or will (e.g., absolute sovereignty or absolute independence) possible. The real issue, though, is that the desire for and will to absolute sovereignty, however imaginary, fuel control society. They cut across all social divisions and work across a panoply of situations and locations. Part of this desire, or this will, is a loss of interest in fixed codes, foundations, or law, and it includes a growing and sometimes insatiable demand to be able to choose, and to choose in utter responsiveness—without having to sacrifice anything in the process. In 1980, French philosopher Paul Virilio read this radical aspiration in someone like Howard Hughes. That American industrial mogul of the 1940s and 1950s, in all his addiction to speed and desire to speed away, in all sovereignty, from the strictures of the world, ultimately became a recluse who preserved his own urine so as not to spill or waste the tiniest drop of his power, of his potential, indeed of his potential to control. We shall return to this in more depth below.

Second, the form of life called control society (authors such as David Garland, 2002, call it “the culture of control”) is not monolithically pure. No form of life ever is. Forms of life emerge, evolve, and ultimately dissipate (albeit perhaps always partially) in constant interaction and hybridization with other forms of life, and with the desire and will that fuel the latter. Older forms of life never fully disappear, and new ones never completely crystallize. And so it is with control society. It never completely replaced previous forms of life, but emerged and developed in processes of hybridization with them. Remnants of the old disciplinary society, for example, are still very much with us. And a pure control society never fully materialized.

It could be argued that control society, and the desire and will that fuel it, have gradually replaced earlier forms of life. The process that kick-started this change was not the neoliberal 1980s and 1990s or the countercultural 1960s and 1970s. Rather, it was the experience of World War II and its immediate “rebellious” aftermath during the late 1940s and 1950s. From then on, a form of life began to emerge that had, at its heart, the following default logic: if all else fails, refute all foundation. This replaced an older default logic: if all else fails, submit to foundation and the promise of ultimate redemption and accept sacrifice. The new logic was underpinned by a
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desire for and will to absolute sovereignty, and it gradually came to manifest itself in the production and circulation of a bewildering variety of regulative passwords (to use Deleuze’s phraseology) in as many situations and locations. This had an impact on the emergence and evolution of the victim movement; but first we must return to World War II.

**In the Wake of World War II**

Between 1941 and 1943, a Dutch Jewish woman, Esther (Etty) Hillesum, who then lived in Amsterdam, kept a diary in which she made a tremendous effort to think through what it means to live under the threat of annihilation. Unlike Anne Frank, Hillesum was an adult. Born in 1914, she was 27 in 1941. A trained jurist and linguist, she was also an avid reader of philosophical works. Although her diary may not be as well known as Anne Frank’s (it was first published in 1981), it is, one could argue, one of the most important documents of World War II. Heart-wrenching, mystical, and analytically reflective in equal measure, the diary is also as deep as it is nakedly honest. In it, Hillesum makes a sustained and at times painfully self-critical effort to tentatively outline what she came to believe could prevent postwar humanity from relapsing into destruction and annihilation.

Indeed, Hillesum’s very personal diary focused not so much on her own life and death as on her vision of the future. That is, what was to come when that most atrocious of wars was over? Hillesum gradually began to believe that the best way to prepare humanity for peace would be to acquire a self-effacing attitude that, over time, might become infectious. In that way, the self could consciously attempt to empty itself. In ridding itself of all its desires and attachments, the self should then reach an open space. The theme and image of open, empty spaces recur in the diary. Far removed from the exigencies of the world and the self, such spaces should not be dwelt in for their own sake. On the contrary, emptying the self should unburden it of anything that could prevent it from moving freely and giving itself freely, to return to the world to support and affirm life as much as possible.

Hillesum hoped that this, in turn, would lead to cycles of reciprocation. Her thought reflects Buddhist elements, but as the diary progresses, she turns to religious language. The open space of emptiness or dissolution into which the self should retreat she calls “God.” This notion is paradoxical (e.g., how could an empty self affirm or support life), but Hillesum’s ideas provide ample room for abstract reflection and pure, unreflective immersion in the world. Hillesum’s dual movement (the withdrawal into the empty desert of pure reflection, and the return to the world by means of a complete, mute immersion into the pure experience of the flesh of the world) is reminiscent of the two forms of sovereignty explored by Hermann Hesse in his 1927 novel *Steppenwolf*. Her ideas are reflected in her metaphors. From the Westerbork internment camp (where she volunteered to support the internees), she writes that she wants to be the “thinking heart of the barracks.” The diary’s final words are: “One would like to be a plaster on many wounds.” Her
impersonal, emptied “one” is coupled with a sterile, empty plaster on the wounds, on the flesh of the world. Eyewitness accounts recorded after the war confirm that Etty Hillesum remained true to her thoughts and word until the last day of her life, which ended in November 1943, in Auschwitz. Much in Hillesum’s thought and life is relevant to what follows, and I shall return to it.

When Etty Hillesum was trying to come to grips with the experiences of war and the Holocaust, philosophers, playwrights, novelists, and other artists were doing the same. For example, in 1942 Jean-Paul Sartre wrote his philosophical magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*. The “nothingness” in the title refers to the absolutely transcendent void that Sartre believes to be at the heart of human being. An empty space of pure indeterminacy, this void is the source of all creativity. This void of freedom in human beings drives them to invent and reinvent themselves and the world. They have always had the potential to use this source of creativity and to take responsibility for it. Also in 1942, Erich Fromm, an émigré Jewish psychoanalyst, wrote that taking responsibility in freedom is what so many people fear. They would much rather submit to authority. Any authority would do as long as it frees them of their freedom and therefore also of their duty of responsibility. Others like Albert Camus, in works such as *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), developed the idea that even if the human condition is necessarily tragic, bound to always end in absurd disaster, this is nothing to moan about. If all ends in tragedy, then there is always hope. If all ends in failure, then no system of oppression lasts forever. One should find joy and hope in this idea, for the ultimate fragility of all supposed foundation means that the as yet unrealized potential of the world, locked in by those foundations, is always only one courageous step away. In later works, such as the play *The Just* (*Les Justes*), published in 1950, Camus analyzed the readiness with which human beings accept and hide behind the fundamentalism of “just” causes, as well as the disastrous consequences of their submissive cowardice. Writers such as Marguerite Yourcenar wrote philosophical novels (e.g., *Mémoires d’Hadrien*, published in 1951) in which the protagonists have a Nietzschean, superhuman quality about them. Calmly circumventing rigid thought and *doxa*, they focus on leading as constructive and creative a life as possible.

Suffice it to say, these authors (and many more) had very different things to say, but a common theme did emerge. Having awakened, whenever possible the sovereign self decides to steer clear of authoritarianism, fundamentalism, dogma, rigid codes, the strictures of inflexible law and authority, and the lures of foundation, and instead to create and add to the world. We witness the emergence of the most embryonic of kernels of a form of life following the default logic: *if all else fails, refute all foundation.*

It is hardly coincidental that all these works ripened in circles of émigré intellectuals who fled Nazism or lived in countries under Nazi occupation. All of them were keenly interested in the idea of personal sovereignty. Here sovereignty implies the capacity and ability to elude all rigid law and code, all supposedly eternal
foundation. To aspiring sovereigns, nothing is eternal or foundational. Nothing is worth slavishly submitting to. After the war, one of the foremost philosophers of the postwar era, Georges Bataille (1954), decided to think through the notion of sovereignty.

According to later authors such as Jeffrey Isaac (1992), in the immediate postwar years something rebellious was in the air. Isaac focused on the writings of Hannah Arendt and Albert Camus, and the modern rebellion was against foundational thought and action, as well as about imagining ways of replacing it with a more careful politics. Any such alternative politics, away from foundations, must rest on the sovereign capacity and ability to withdraw from, ignore, circumvent, or transgress (another of Bataille’s themes) all supposedly foundational code. As the postwar kernel of sovereign aspiration became more pervasive throughout late modern culture, one foundation after the other fell: God and religion, marriage and family values, gender roles, sexuality, biological gender codes, one’s DNA, and all other strictures or authorities claiming to be worthy of demanding submission.

To ask whether this also applies to the writings of a soul as heart-wrenchingly delicate as Etty Hillesum’s would be to miss the point. Of importance here is that the newly emerging form of life that aspires to absolute personal sovereignty consisted at its core of very little. Perhaps it was merely this: an inconsolable distrust of ultimate foundations and a radically strong desire, or will, to elude, in all sovereignty, all that is presented as inescapable foundation. In some cases, this desire, or will, may lead to a benign rebellious attitude of carefulness and creativity. In other cases, it may very well generate a more belligerent politics of stubborn, obstinate (and therefore also slightly paradoxical) opposition. The history of late modern culture has allowed for both.

This deep-seated desire for and will to sovereignty, indeed this desire for and will to elude all foundational law and code, this flight from control, constitutes in itself a form of control. The flight from control itself implies the exercise of control. The aspiring sovereign, in his or her effort to withdraw from the strictures of the world, is exercising control. And here is the connection with the notion of victimhood. On the road to sovereignty the aspiring sovereign, attempting to exercise control, is often inclined to perceive, everywhere and anywhere, all kinds of hindrances and barriers, and to consider him or herself to be a potential victim of them. At least the aspiring sovereign is more likely to consider him or herself a victim than those living a form of life in which hindrances and barriers are usually seen as necessary sacrifices on the path to a greater good, or as part of some other supposedly irrefutable foundation. In the postwar age of aspiring sovereigns, though, this has become less and less the case. Under the default operative logic of if all else fails, refute all foundation, the space for something like a movement of victims opens up, almost imperceptibly at first, but gradually expands and becomes more pervasive.
Consumer Culture

At the core of this new form of life was a refutation of all foundational thought and action. Consequently and paradoxically, it also held within its embryonic nucleus the germs of Deleuze’s control society, as well as the potential for something like a victim culture. At first, considerable energy went into the creative construction of new ways of life. It is now a cliché to mention the construction of the welfare state in this context. In a way, the welfare state resulted from a perhaps all-too-uneasy mixture of a politics of middle-of-the-road carefulness (Camus probably would have appreciated this had he not died prematurely in 1960) and visionary commitment to the production of what would prove to be a new stabilizing foundation (a supposed one, at least) of everyday and political life in most Western democracies. The full-fledged welfare state generated its own contradicitions and, ultimately, from the early 1970s onward, became the target of severe criticism. The reasons for this cannot be explored in any detail, but during the 1970s the functional capacity of welfare state provision declined, and with that, so did its legitimacy. Trenchant criticisms already existed, particularly from newly emerging professional segments in most Western populations, who lamented its authoritarianism and disciplinary workings. In an age of aspiring sovereigns, many began to consider themselves not only under the disciplinary control of welfare bureaucracies, but also victimized by what they perceived to be a juggernaut from which they needed to flee, or control in turn.

One feature of the welfare state requires additional comment. Once firmly established, the system’s main dynamic changed. Initially a collective, constructive effort, it became one of centrifugal (re)distribution. Construction is usually achieved collaboratively, collectively, while access to welfare provisions (e.g., benefits or allowances, etc.) is usually an individual process. By the mid-1960s, this centrifugal dynamic resonated well with the evolution from a consumer economy to a full-blown consumer culture, or even a “consumer society.” By necessity, production is generally a collaborative effort. Consumption, however, is ultimately done alone. In his classic *The Society of the Spectacle* (published originally in French in 1967), Guy Debord was determined to argue how, in this new consumer society, one of the most fundamental logics is one of separation. In a pervasive consumer culture or society such as ours, Debord argued, people are increasingly constituted as individuals while they watch, separately and often in splendid physical isolation, the massive and neverending stream of commodity-image flowing by. The parade of commodity-image (or the spectacle) in turn unleashes an equally neverending flow of desire in potential consumers. Both flows are inexhaustible. This can only lead, and *has* led, to a state of perpetual agony in many, if not most, as one of Zygmunt Bauman’s books on liquid modernity, *The Art of Life* (2008), argues. Although this consumer culture has been and remains replete with agony, it did manage to connect with, if not completely capture, the sovereign aspirations that emerged in the wake of World War II, if only to engender a culturally pervasive parody of sovereignty.
Consumer goods (the image they carry and the promise they hold for the consumer) provide their purchasers with the impression or illusion that they can live creative, artful lives (see Bauman’s *The Art of Life*). They allow aspiring sovereigns to continuously reconstitute their images and selves, which in turn provides them with a sense of control, sovereign control. The aspiring sovereign-consumer thus asks: Am I not in control of my own life conditions? Do I not control my destiny, my self? The consumer lives under the impression that he or she has the capacity to control the world out there and themselves. The external world streams by as commodity-images from which to choose, which consumers experience as the ability to control the world by, quite literally, consuming it, by making it their own. This parody, of course, offers precious little creativity, since choosing the commodity-image takes place under the gaze of the image-makers. Self-fashioning that thrives on mere consumer choice offers little real sovereignty, and submission to the spectacle of consumption results in little genuine control. Finally, there is little true freedom and even less invention in chains of consumer choices that are tied to a firm foundation in the command, or the order word (evoking Gilles Deleuze), that shouts, “Follow and Consume!” However illusory this sense of sovereignty may be in a consumer culture, it is powerful. It taps into a deep well of aspiration surging up from the experience of World War II.

In a consumer culture, as Debord argued, life tends to be quite non-communicative. Of course, a lot of chatter goes on; but real, genuine communication, i.e., communication that is geared toward real, genuine change, is very rare. Such communication is not needed in a consumer culture. Real communication is necessary only when creative, collective production and collaboration are required. Why would an isolated, separated consumer wish to communicate? With whom? There is little to communicate about or toward. This resonates well with the desire for or will to sovereignty. Why would a sovereign wish to communicate with anyone? What is to be achieved?

In a consumer culture, however pervasive, non-communicative separation is not pure or absolute. As authors such as Michel Maffesoli (1996) have argued, non-communicative separation—*faux* sovereignty—is often interrupted by bouts of “neo-tribal” affectivity. Neo-tribes are hedonistic gatherings in which the only form of communication—*faux* communication, if you wish—is the joint but largely mute experience of consumption by consumers in search of temporary proximity and affect. Such neo-tribes are a manifestation of a particular mode of sovereignty, i.e., the mode whereby the aspiring sovereign immerses him or herself, in mute and unreflective abandon, in the flesh of the world. There is something animal-like about this type of sovereignty. Here the aspiring sovereign “becomes animal”: lawless, unreflective animal (as a Deleuze would have said), or “beast,” as Jacques Derrida (2009, 2011) argued in his final volumes on *The Beast and the Sovereign*. 
Etty Hillesum (or indeed Hermann Hesse) considered the act of immersion as a phase in extreme, selfless altruism. In late modern neo-tribes, however, mute abandon expresses a travesty that masks a deep lack of communicativeness. Neo-tribes have their own regulatory codes (Deleuze’s passwords) that allow tribal members, in an illusion of sovereignty, to control “their” event. The non-communicative aspect of this consumer culture intensified under circumstances that began to appear from the 1970s onward throughout most Western democracies.

During the 1960s (and well into the 1970s), a victim culture and victim movement began to take shape. Often, the language used was that of human rights. One of the most cited, classic, and iconic articles in criminology, for example, is Herman and Julia Schwendinger’s (1970) “Defenders of Order or Guardians of Human Rights.” It expressed a desire—an aspiring sovereign’s desire—to move away from systems, institutions, and practices of oppression and domination. It contained a plea for human rights to be adopted as the guiding idea for political (and criminological) thought and action. As part of the countercultural movement of the 1960s, including its stubborn opposition and deeply held belief in clear boundaries between corrupt centers and pure peripheries, this move represented a relapse into foundationalism. Yet it also manifests aspects of the centrifugal dynamic that characterized much of the age. Human rights are given, distributed. In the last instance, they are given to individuals. The recipient of a distributed quantum of human rights is, ultimately, the individual human being, despite membership in this or that group. On this point, human rights discourse became anchored in the waters of sovereign aspiration and in the desire for or will to control. From the 1980s onward, this discourse became mired in the politics of identity.

Already Arrived: The Culture of Precaution

By the 1970s, a new demographic group had appeared in most Western democracies, i.e., highly educated professionals who, reasonably affluent, had good access to various consumer markets. This new manifestation of what formerly was called the middle class gradually came to harbor “post-material” desires. Unlike their parents, they were comfortable in the knowledge that they “had arrived.” Instead of seeking to arrive somewhere, their main goal in life was to defend and protect what had already been achieved. Their sense of sovereignty, still rooted in their parents’ experience of 30 years before, was much less focused on the construction of bright futures. On the contrary, they were preoccupied with keeping the future, any future, at bay as much as possible (for a slightly different take, see Furedi 2005, 87–98). From the perspective of this generation, there was nothing, or very little, to be gained from grand visions of a shining future, or from projects promising such an outcome. Having already arrived, why would the future interest them? For them, the future can only hold risk.
This post-material generation was (and, to some extent, remains in the twenty-first century) prepared to protect their quality of life, almost at any cost. A dominant cultural logic of this generation has been how to keep at bay, neutralize, destroy, or otherwise control as much as possible anything that threatens to disrupt their quality of life. Substantial sovereign aspiration fuels this. This generation’s radical unwillingness to accept a diminished quality of life, or to make sacrifices, betrays a powerful desire for, or will to, control. Nonetheless, this generation is not completely risk averse. Rather, it is control obsessed. Risk is even welcome, as Stephen Lyng (2004) clearly analyzed, so long as it allows the post-material aspiring sovereign to hone his or her ability to control even the laws of physical nature and their own selves. In the early 1970s, only a few “edge workers” such as Evel Knievel honed such skills, but by the end of the 1980s control-obsessed, sovereignty-fueled voluntary risk-seeking activity had been utterly democratized. The culture of this generation stressed that all risk lacking the potential to become control skills had to be blocked off, at whatever cost. Extreme forms of edgework thus represent another form of sovereign desire. The aspiring sovereign plunges into the sheer flesh of the world (the pure nature of physical law) with death-defying abandon and with a largely dissolved and unreflective self that allows for sheer “corporeal transactions” (dixit Lyng) with matter and energy to undertake all the control skills and capacity-enhancing work.

But this generation has also been prepared to maintain a culture of considerable, even extreme precaution. As the Dutch sociologist Roel Pieterman (2008) explained, the culture of extreme precaution that is in the process of saturating and, as a consequence, also stifling many aspects of late modern life is one that thrives on a deeply felt reluctance to accept, much less engage with, anything that might threaten the stability of one’s life conditions. That potentially includes everything and anything. Nested in this culture of precaution, the aspiring sovereign is inclined to exercise control (however imaginary) through a radical willingness to block any source of unnecessary danger, risk, or even discomfort. Sacrifice is no longer accepted as a notion, let alone as an imperative. It only makes sense in a culture marked by a future-oriented, forward-thrusting movement. Having already arrived, the precautionary sovereign is, of course, not even slightly interested in that or in the future.

Creative experimentation is scarcely possible here. This kind of sovereign aspiration would be completely foreign to someone like Albert Camus. In a culture of precaution, Camus’s anti-foundational carefulness is reduced to a radical, if not fundamentalist, refusal of the potentiality of potentially everything. Defense or protection of one’s life conditions is the ultimate aim, or position, of the precautionary sovereign. They are desperate to keep intact literally all potential and capacity at their disposal. None of their life choices should preempt subsequent ones. This is a recipe for disaster and agony. The many regulative passwords in control society
may offer the aspiring sovereign temporary relief and reprieve, but a new bout of
agony inevitably will set in.

This agony compounds the agony already experienced by the consumerist
sovereign. Furthermore, the precautionary sovereign’s desire and will are highly
paradoxical. In their attempt to ward off anything deemed undesirable, precautionary
sovereigns perceive serial threats and every effort to control them as simultaneously
undermining their life conditions. Their endorsement of often-draconian measures
will return to haunt them. The insistent precautionary sovereigns who demand
implementation of extreme security measures (e.g., following disappointing
statistics on traffic incidents) discover that such measures restrict their life choices
and foster a reliance on those solutions. But dependency does not sit comfortably
with sovereign aspirations. This agony sometimes plays out inside polling booths
during local referendums. Every attempt to escape their agony through ongoing and
ever-widening precautionary strategies only prolongs and increases their distress.

In the process, they are often unable to engage in real, genuine communication.
Why should they communicate to solve a particular communal problem? There are
no problems to solve, only undesirable risks to control. Should they communicate
with other people? Like all natural objects and laws of physics, people are only
natural objects that need to be controlled. One does not communicate with natural
objects or with physical laws. One aspires to steer clear of them, surpass them,
transcend them, use them, mobilize them, neutralize them, in short, control them.
The non-communicative dimension of the culture of precaution builds on and
amplifies the non-communicative muteness in which the consumer sovereigns
cloak themselves. This culture has had a serious impact on the victim movement,
to which we now turn.

The Victim Movement and the Culture of Precaution

The defensive or protectionist attitude of precautionary sovereigns expands upon
earlier forms of sovereign aspiration. First, there is the postwar desire for or the
will to flee or elude all foundational law or code in search of conditions that allow
for the absolute control of one’s life conditions. Second, there is the consumer
sovereign’s desire or will to be able to choose, absolutely and radically, without
sacrifice. This is a manifestation of the will or desire to be absolutely, utterly,
and completely responsive (however imaginary and illusory). Third, there is the
precautionary obsession with the protection of one’s life conditions. This includes
the often-radical zeal to completely assure that nothing could ever pose any threat,
however imaginary or small, to the life conditions one has achieved. Well into the
twenty-first century, the accumulated effects of these forms of sovereign aspiration
are beginning to ripple across a wide variety of cultural contexts. The embryonic
kernel that was barely discernible in the immediate aftermath of World War II has
grown into a vast expanse of attitudes and behaviors.
This expanse is not monolithic. The embryonic postwar kernel allowed for significant levels of incoherence and contradiction. Moreover, at issue is only one particular, never fully crystallized form of life, i.e., the form of life that aspires to absolute, radical sovereignty at its heart. The kernel, however small, became an unstoppable wellspring of sovereign aspiration. With sovereign aspiration came ever-widening images and definitions of victimhood. Aspiring sovereigns, on the road to absolute sovereignty, tend to perceive increasing hindrances along the road, some of which are labeled as criminal. Paradoxically, these turn aspiring sovereigns into victims.

The 1980s witnessed the emergence of various sovereign attitudes and practices, along with resulting definitions of victimhood. Most were captured by identity politics. Many behaviors or practices that were previously accepted, if grudgingly, were now defined as inherently criminal. A case in point is sexual and domestic abuse. Most new instances of criminalization (and corresponding victim-identifications) were part of identity politics, which evolved from merging trends such as the anti-foundational and centrifugal cultural dynamic unleashed during the early postwar years or a human rights culture that thrives on the constant and unrelenting search for systems of domination and oppression that need to be criticized, attacked, or dismantled, and for their victims to be “empowered,” if not “liberated.” Likewise, a highly protective and defensive precautionary culture accompanied a clear willingness, or strategy, by official state institutions to mobilize a victim discourse in a bid to regain the legitimacy lost when the welfare state was no longer capable of fulfilling its core functions (on this and related issues, see, e.g., Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Garland 2002; Simon 1993 and 2009).

To varying extents, the identity politics of the 1980s captured some of the energies available in each trend. At first, the basic premise was that there are privileged positions (or standpoints) from which particular behaviors or practices can be identified and labeled oppressive or criminal. However, before long the radical desire for or will to absolute sovereignty that had been boiling restlessly at the heart of the control society burst through the surfaces of identity politics, disrupting its fragile foundations. Authors such as bell hooks, an African American feminist cultural critic, built a career upon the argument that all identities, and all subject positions, float on loose sand. In Outlaw Culture (1994), hooks argued how positions such as “woman” or “African American” are inherently unstable, and, if stubbornly adhered to (as opposed to merely tactically), may lead to oppression and domination both externally (by oppressing all that is deemed to be dwelling outside their own code of identity and outside their own “law”) and within (by suppressing internal difference and contestation). Like many other critics of the 1990s, hooks tried to deconstruct the imagined foundations in identity politics. By the end of the 1990s, any belief in stable subject positions or standpoints was on its way out. It had been unable to capture and lock the radical desire for absolute sovereignty in a firm, stable place.
The sovereign hunt for victimhood, however paradoxical, continued nonetheless. New areas were discovered, one after the other, where the aspiring sovereign noticed victimization by forces or processes that threatened their quality of life. One such area has been the environment (see, e.g., Furedi 2005: 87–98). A very potent component of the aspiring sovereign’s imaginary is a pristine, lush, and green environment where human activity has left no trace. The unspoiled environment reminds the precautionary sovereign that it is possible to maintain a zone where all of life’s potential remains intact, unspent, and unspoiled. For precautionary sovereigns, this image is a point of reference, an ideal toward which to strive, and a site to replenish their energetic potential. Their interest is not in nuclear power, wind farms, genetically modified crops and related experiments, fracking, or home building. The future that such activities promise is not needed, since the precautionary sovereign has already arrived. These experiments simply threaten to sap potential from the environment and from the lives of aspiring sovereigns. And that potential must be kept fully intact, protected from and defended against all possible victimizing forces.

Beyond the environment, from the 1980s onward a plethora of undesirable behaviors, groups, or events, actual or potential, real or imagined, became aspects of victimhood. One could fall victim to “antisocial behavior,” for example, or to all kinds of unwanted “risky behaviors” that can cause “harm.” Authors such as Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2009) analyzed how a global victim culture, or pervasive “empire of trauma,” gradually grew out of a multitude of desires to claim traumatic victimhood (and, potentially, compensation or “justice” as well). Various traumatizing forces were to blame. Precautionary sovereigns can even fall victim to the overprotective zeal of a nanny state that constantly seeks to regain its lost legitimacy by offering support to victims. By the turn of the twenty-first century, this process was largely complete. More or less when a few thousand Belgians in a small provincial market town were agonizing over their local traffic referendum (weighing precautionary protection against the unrestricted freedom to speed and roam), a pervasive culture of radically aspiring sovereignty had already taken hold of control societies across the globe. As Gabe Mythen (2007) posed the question, “Are we,” culturally speaking, “all victims now?”

The aspiring sovereigns no longer unconditionally accept anything with a hint of law, code, or principle. No longer are they willing to submit to anyone or anything. The aspiring sovereigns are even unwilling to accept a fixed subject position, reserving the right to change their life trajectories and subject positions as they see fit. But if the aspiring sovereign is no longer prepared to accept a privileged vantage point among the many whom he or she decides to take up during his or her life (doing so would be to submit to a fixed code), then the world and anything in it suddenly appear as so many instances of ambivalence. That which yesterday represented a threat today becomes a potentially useful resource. Yesterday’s enemies now become allies. Today’s opportunity may tomorrow be a risk that must be blocked
off with precautionary zeal. In *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Zygmunt Bauman (1991) analyzed how many in late modernity in particular have realized that the world is inherently and ineradicably ambivalent. The only thing that can be done about this is to learn to live with it. Sovereign aspiration, which is deeply rooted in the experience and aftermath of World War II, may have something to do with this growing awareness of ineradicable ambivalence. At almost every point in the aspiring sovereign’s life trajectory, he or she must face ambivalence. Often this leads to agony. The totality of the decisions taken by aspiring sovereigns would likely in a bygone age have been called inconsistent or incoherent. But aspiring sovereigns would not mind, since they no longer care about the law, code, or principle that commands, “Thou Shalt Be Coherent and Consistent.”

**Concluding Word**

I have attempted to argue that the emergence and subsequent development of a victim movement, or better perhaps, a movement of victims, originates in the experience of World War II and its immediate aftermath. My argument emphasizes only a few of the possibly under-examined aspects of the genesis of the late-modern culture of victimhood. These include the emergence of a cultural desire for or will to absolute sovereignty; a reluctance to accept, sacrifice to, or submit to anything that purports to be foundational law, code, or principle; and an agony-filled desire or will to control one’s life conditions and intervene in the world using every precaution. An effort has been made to explain how these trends shaped the kernel of a form of life that others have called control society. The victim movement did not so much originate in weakness and suffering (although they undoubtedly played a role), as in an awakened radical desire for or will to achieve absolute sovereign strength and potential (however imaginary and illusory they may be).

One caveat is in order. There are many possible ways to analyze the development of the culture of victimhood. Moreover, the form of life discussed here (control society) never was and never will be monolithic. Forms of life never are. They emerge and dissipate in processes of hybridization. This is something to bear in mind when pondering the partial nature of the arguments marshaled here.

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