

Blaming the Victim and a Victim Focused Identity

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

In the 1970s, there was a popular sociology book titled *Blaming the Victim* in which the author argued that the powers that be and their apologists blamed the victims of oppression for their plight. This notion remains popular among bleeding heart liberals, progressives and radicals. The thinking goes that historically oppressed peoples are absolutely powerless to substantially improve their condition, and that their only real hope for anything approaching genuine liberation must come from the powers that be. Most people embracing this view accuse most people advocating self-help strategies for the downtrodden of blaming the victim (s). Indeed, some progressives go so far as to proudly make such absurd statements as “I don’t believe in self-help.”

When I headed African Americans for Humanism (AAH) in the early years, I attended a gathering of Black Unitarian Universalist ministers at Howard University. The group was led by the late Black humanist William Jones, author of *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology*. I presented before the group our first draft of the historic African-American Humanist Declaration. There were many prescriptions for what we African Americans could do to improve our plight. I was shocked when the supposedly humanistic ministers started accusing me of blaming the victim. As I saw it – and still see it – calling people to do everything in their power to improve their plight is not necessarily about blaming *anyone*. (In any case, the declaration went through five revisions altogether before it was finished.)

This raises another important point. Progressives have never accused leaders such as Malcolm X of blaming the victim. Yet Malcolm often expressed the same views as Black conservatives. It seems that one may be forgiven for having the audacity to advocate self-help for Black people if he or she also forcefully condemns White supremacy from a progressive perspective. However, while it is understandable that many African Americans distrust conservatives, it is a mistake to believe that conservatives always get it wrong. Indeed, this is lazy thinking if it is thinking at all. Too many people all too anxiously embrace the either/or common logical fallacy. However, it is important to remember the old line that even a stopped clock is right twice a day. Common logical fallacies such as poisoning the well and the genetic fallacy will only lead people astray.

George W. Bush used to speak of “the soft racism of low expectations.” That is to say, many progressives think so lowly of African Americans that they believe that Black people are utterly helpless without Whites coming to their rescue. Unless such help arrives, African Americans are expected to remain on the bottom of society.

This is, indeed, an insulting view. Can all of the problems of historically oppressed peoples be laid at the feet of the oppressors? Progressives tend to blame all of the problems of the Arab world on the West. However, the fact of the matter is that culture and personal choices are powerful shapers of society and economic status. It is not wise to blame the West because many Muslims in the Arab world will not allow women to vote or drive cars. It is not the fault of Westerners or global capitalism that many Arab Muslims carry out Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and “honor killings” and throw acid in the faces of women they deem disobedient. It is not the fault of the West that so many Africans and Arabs persecute and kill LGBTQI people. On the contrary, cultural and religious beliefs give rise to this kind of intolerance among rich and poor alike.

In the United States, progressive scholars and intellectuals are almost exclusively concerned with the putative structural causes of poverty, racism, etc. However, Black conservatives have noted that culture also plays a powerful role in the creation and exacerbation of poverty. In his book *Black Rednecks and White Liberals*, Black conservative Thomas Sowell provides much evidence to back up his claims that negative cultural practices can hold groups down, and that self-help can bring forth much group progress. Writing about Blacks freed before and after the Civil War, he relates: "...cultural differences led to striking socioeconomic differences among blacks, as they did among whites." (p. 43)

The author also argues that as late as the 14th century, due to an inferior culture, Scotland was far behind England in agriculture, industry, literacy, etc. However, as centuries went by, the Scots were able to copy English culture and came to be leaders in medicine, philosophy, economics, literature, political science, etc.

In other books, such as Juan Williams' *Enough!* And Larry Elder's *Stupid Black Men*, authors show how African Americans spend far too much money on cars, liquor and other items, while reducing spending on books. In *Stupid Black Men*, Elder quotes Yolanda Young from her column titled "Tough Choices for Tough Times" on page nine of the April 2, 2004 issue of *USA TODAY*:

According to published reports, the Ariel Mutual Funds/Charles Schwab 2003 Black Investor Survey found that when comparing households where blacks and whites had roughly the same household incomes, whites saved nearly 20 percent more each month for retirement, and 30 percent of African- Americans earning \$100,000 a year had less than \$5,000 in retirement savings. (p. 83)

Such writers provide much evidence to show that much of what bleeding hearts attribute to White supremacy should be attributed to bad cultural traits and poor personal choices. The main problem is that conservatives sincerely believe that self-help is a panacea for all that ails Black America, which it certainly is not.

Progressives should continue to demand equality of opportunity from the powers that be. However, people should never be discouraged from doing everything in their power to improve their plight and combat the negative aspects of their culture. Just as progressives demand excellence from their own children, they should not allow the soft racism of low expectations to stop them from also demanding excellence from the children of the poor. It is within everyone's power to improve his or her plight to some extent. This is not blaming the victim. This is just good, old-fashioned common sense, and it is consistent with Paul Kurtz's conception of *eupraxsophy* (wisdom and good conduct in living.)

In short, everyone needs to learn to think outside the box. Like it or not, culture and personal choices matter a great deal. Historically oppressed people should look for every advantage they can get – cultural or otherwise. It is indeed true that self-help can only take one so far. The same is true of government aid and intervention. Change your culture and personal choices and you can change your destiny – for better and worse.