ANDREW CALCUTT
“The End of Adulthood?”

Though the point is rarely raised explicitly, Americans today seem obsessed with victimage: everyone seems to want to claim victim status, from the guests on Oprah to the men who believe they are the victims of feminism and join the Promise Keepers in response. Andrew Calcutt, for his part, thinks that things have gone far enough, and in this excerpt from Arrested Development: Pop Culture and the Erosion of Adulthood (1998), he charts the development of “victim culture” and offers his own diagnosis: we are becoming a culture of children in retreat from adulthood. And his provocative solution? Grow up. Andrew Calcutt is a writer and journalist whose books include White Noise: An A-Z of the Contradictions in Cyberculture (1999) and Beat: The Iconography of Victimhood from the Beat Generation to Princess Diana (1998).

A new political order has emerged in which the victim is supreme, and adults are treated more like children. Meanwhile, many adults are more likely to think of themselves as victims, or to identify with the motif of the authentic innocent child. The result is a convergence between on the one hand the spontaneous development of a cultural personality which is victimized and childlike, and on the other hand the remoulding of the individual's relationship to the state in accordance with his supposed immaturity. The convergence of these trends is facilitated by the already existing non-adult language provided by the counterculture and the pop culture which succeeded it.

The key question in such circumstances is whether adulthood will go into abeyance; or whether the end of adulthood can be resisted by a critique of infantilism and the reclamation of subjectivity.

"I draw most strength from the victims for they represent America to me…You are my heroes and heroines. You are but little lower than the angels"1 So said Janet Reno, attorney general of the United States of America, as part of her address to a victims' rights conference in August 1996. Reno's near-worship of victims ("little lower than the angels") demonstrates the drastic change that has occurred in the mores of the most powerful country in the world which, as American critic Jams Hillman has pointed out, used to be famous for its "heroic culture."2 The effusive praise for victims on the part of one of the most senior officer appointed by the federal government also suggests that the Clinton administration has adopted the victim as a model persona - the kind of person it can do business with.

A small number of American critics have noted and protested against the elevation of victimhood. The victim," observed Christopher Latch, has come to enjoy a certain moral superiority in our society," to the point where competing interest groups now vie for the privileged status of victims."3 The conservative critic C. J. Sykes was equally unimpressed by the elevation of victimhood, which he correlated with "the decay of American character." Sykes was concerned that "the claim that one is a victim has become one of the few currencies of intellectual exchange,"4 to the extent that the invocation of victim status is often sufficient to close down debate and prevent further interrogation of almost any controversial topic.

We're All Victims Now

Victims are everywhere; and, by the same token, it seems that everyone is involved in a relationship of victimization. In 1995 Channel 4 broadcast Battered Britain, an extensive season of programs, most of them documentaries, which depicted British society as a nexus of abusive relationships. Writing in the Observer in the summer of 1996, Nicci Gerrard wrote a feature article entitled "The Monster Inside Us All" in which she claimed that some people are born bullies - others are born victims. Each of us has been one or the other.5 Gerrard's categorization of the general population into bullies and victims is now commonplace, with the added complication that bullies are often said to be responding in kind to an
earlier phase of their lives in which they themselves were victimized. Experience of victimhood has come to be regarded as the common denominator which defines our humanity.

In The Face, meanwhile, Damon Albarn (the lead singer in the band Blur) saw through the perceptions of victimhood which Gerrard et al. seem to take at face value. Albarn recognized that our self-image has been re-oriented to the point where there is a tendency for all of us to see ourselves as victims, regardless of whether or not such an image is justified: "If there's going to be an epitaph for the nineties, it will be 'by the end, we all felt like victims.'"

This is the era in which celebrities, from footballers to princesses, cannot hope to retain their celebrity unless they come up with a story in which they play the role of the victim...

Just as Adam Smith's homo oeconomicus (economic man) was the predominant self-image of the individual during the progressive phase of capitalism, so nowadays the victim is among the top personae in today's society. Moreover, it seems that the greasy pole which brought the victim to this position as none other than the axis which runs through pop culture all the way back to the counterculture which preceded it.

In the mid-1990s the figure of the pop star as self-made victim was updated by Richey Edwards, the lead singer of The Manic Street Preachers, who disappeared on the morning of January 31, 1995, never (yet) to be seen again. Before his unexpected exit, Edwards's lyrics had proclaimed that "everyone's a victim," and he sang of "the beautiful dignity in self-abuse." Edwards first made a name for himself when, in front of a journalist, he carved "4REAL" in his arm with a razor, and a photograph of him, bleeding but impassive, went to the NME [New Musical Express]. Edward’s enigmatic retreat from pop life provides an equally powerful image of victimhood, on which his current reputation now rests.

It would be fanciful to suggest that either Nicci Gerrard or Janet Reno is devoted to The Manic Street Preachers and the memory of missing band member Richey Edwards. Nevertheless both of them will undoubtedly have been touched by the pop sensibility to which Edwards is now a prominent contributor, and which itself contributed to the notion that everyone is a victim (Edwards/Gerrard) and to the image of the beautiful dignity of victims (Edwards/Reno).

Pre-adult

In today's society the other, equally powerful self-image is that of the child. Apart from the victim, pre-adulthood is the only other universal unit of cultural currency, while adulthood itself is about as welcome as negative equity. Hence the statement by William Eccleshare, chief executive of the leading advertising agent, Ammirati Puris Lintas to the effect that contemporary advertising constantly utilizes images of the pre-adult in the knowledge that over-twenty-ones will identify with them: "If all advertising seems to be directed at the young it's because we've found the most effective way to appeal to everyone to make commercials which embody attitudes associated with youth."

The victim and the child are the two leading cultural personalities in today's society. Moreover they complement each other, in that they are joined together by the common element of powerlessness. Abused and defenseless; the victim and the child are attractive personae in that they represent life beyond the discredited struggle for power between competing, self interested adults. How ironic, therefore, that the motifs of the victim and the child have been adopted by a new ruling elite in its pursuit of more power over individuals and society…
As well as through the promotion of the victim, adulthood is being attacked from another direction. The growing demand for "children's rights" may do little to improve the lives of children. But it serves to undermine parents and their rights, while extending the authority of state-sponsored professionals.

With the Children Act 1989 the Conservative government put children's rights at the center of social police, and the New Labour government has followed suit. At first sight, the bipartisan emphasis on children's rights might seem progressive; comparable, perhaps, to the emancipation of women or blacks. But this very comparison is indicative of the fallacious character of "children's rights."

Women and blacks are adults who are denied equal rights, in so far as they belong to specific social groups which are oppressed in society. Were it not for the fact that their rights have been withheld, they would be capable of exercising them fully. Children, or, the other hand, are by definition not adults. They are still learning to be adults, hence the, are incapable of exercising rights on an equal footing with already existing adults. Children are necessarily immature in a way that women and black people are not. In this respect they can have no claim to equal rights.

Official emphasis on “children's rights” cannot succeed in raising children to the same level of capability as adults, any more than you can legislate to put the amoeba and the monkey at the same point on the evolutionary scale. But the cause of "children's rights" does have the effect of bringing adults, in official eyes, down to the level of children. It does this by putting children on a par with adults, as if they were no more and no less capable than adults in their dealings with society. The corollary is that adults are no more and no less capable than children. As a result we are all officially infantilized by means of the progressive-sounding language of "children’s rights."

While adults are pulled back to the same level as minors who by definition cannot yet exercise rights for themselves, various state-sponsored professionals have raised themselves up to new heights of super-adult authority by promising to exercise rights on behalf of children. Under the Children Act 1989, for example, the state acts on behalf of the child to protect it from abuse. According to the libertarian commentator James Heartfield, "it is not the child that exercises the rights, but the state. The state steps in as a kind of super-parent, to lord it over those parents deemed to have failed in their responsibility to children."9

The events at Waco, Texas, in April 1993 provide a graphic illustration of how the state's role as super-parent can go tragically wrong. Janet Reno, the aforementioned Attorney-General of the United States of America, was persuaded that the children in the compound of the Branch Davidian cult were at risk of abuse. As a lawyer who made her name in child-abuse cases, Reno may have been particularly sympathetic to such claims. In any case, she gave the FBI permission to move in. The authorities mounted a military-style operation which resulted in the death of eighty-six people, who were either gunned down or killed in the ensuing fire. Of these seventeen were children, of whom Heartfield says they were apparently killed in defense of their own rights"10...

Beyond Left and Right

If politics today has gone beyond left and right, then the transcendent motifs of the new politics are the victim and the child. These motifs are now as significant throughout pop culture and mainstream politics as they were in the minority counterculture of thirty or forty years ago.

The authoritarian consequences of the transfer of such icons from the counterculture to the new political order has attracted the attention of a handful of commentators. Andrew Sinclair, for example,
observed the "trend" of the 1960s being "stood on is head;" and becoming "the thought-police of the politically correct academics and politicians who would rise to govern America."¹¹ Jeff Nuttall noted that "Political Correctness comes straight out of the old sixties Underground."¹² At the beginning of the 1980s Bernice Martin sensed that the sensibility of the 1960s would outlive the left-wing politics with which it was originally associated, and that it could give shape to the times to come: "Underneath the red clothing was a beast of a different color, or perhaps a chameleon able to take on any political coloring…a specialist and exaggerated form of a phenomenon which is affecting all spheres of society."¹³

The radical sociologist Stanley Cohen recognized that the 1960s notion that "the personal is political" has come to unexpected fruition in victim culture, where it also has the effect of undermining democratic rights:

For victims, if not for deviants (as we thought in the sixties), the personal has indeed become political. This culture of victimization emerges from identity politics: groups defining themselves only in terms of their claims to special identity and suffering. And this trend is given a spurious epistemological dignity by the ethic of multiculturalism. The result of all this is to actually subvert the . . politics based such old fashioned Enlightenment meta-narratives as common citizenship and universal rights.¹⁴

Cohen seems to be suggesting that, by coming down to the level of the personal, politics has been reduced in scale. But instead of thereby expanding the scope of the individual, as was the hope in the 1960s, this has served only to reduce the range of humanity…

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that politics should now be redolent with the iconography of powerlessness. This has come about not least because politics, as the implementation, "magically," of "imaginary" solutions, is at one and the same time the fantastic and the fetishized expression of powerlessness at the programmatic level. If politics today focuses on the image of the child, that is entirely in keeping with the advent of a new generation of politicians who in the face of adversity, and their own programmatic bankruptcy, liken themselves to children in their powerlessness and vulnerability. Not are they alone in their self-image. The sense of powerlessness is widely shared throughout society; and it is through the common language of pop culture (née counterculture) that the elite and the rest of society are able to communicate their shared sense of powerlessness and victimization.

**New Adulthood?**

From this it can be seen that the erosion of adulthood, and the absence of a plausible image of history-making activity, cannot be remedied merely by the invention of a new self-image or the re-presentation of an old one. Indeed, when the outward form of adulthood is re-presented in today's contest, its content is usually turned inside out: Thus the donning of suits and bow ties by followers of the black separatist leader home Farrakhan does not express the progressive but by no means perfect culture of universalism and democracy which was originally presented in the anonymity of the man's dark suit: rather it is a loud demonstration of particularism in this case on the part of blacks - a response to the failure of bourgeois universalism which re-presents that failure all the more intensely.

In short there are no cultural solutions to the problems posed by victim culture. The latter can be addressed, not by the desire to look like adults but only by our attempts to act as adults. How can we succeed in our attempts? Firstly, by resisting any further incursion into what little adult autonomy we have left. For example, if Jack Straw, the Home Secretary, proceeds to act in loco parentis by imposing a curfew on under-sixteens, parents should resist any such measure on the grounds that it makes children out of them too, and inform the relevant authorities that they are perfectly capable of fixing their own children's bedtimes, thank you very much.
Generally speaking, if those in authority insist on issuing lists of instructions on how we should bring up our children, we can make it clear that we have no need of such "advice" (for to accept it, and hence to be come dependent on it, is the equivalent of wearing L plates for the rest of one lives). Furthermore, we should encourage those around us to reject the self-image of victims. On different occasions, the rejection of this self-image might mean issuing a challenge to the current preeminence of identity politics, or it might involve campaigning for free speech, and opposing the authorities' patronizing assumption that the rest of us are not adult enough to cope with offensive remarks.

However, resisting the new power generation in our day-to-day lives will make sense only if it is connected to a broader critique of society and its current impasse - otherwise the new mode of infantalized existence will never be revealed as the creature of authoritarianism and the obstacle to human development which it most certainly is. When such a critique becomes something like common knowledge, the absence of history-making subjectivity will have been recognized as a consequence of the essential but none the less not immovable character of today’s, society; and, having demystified the dearth of subjectivity, we will once more be able to envisage ourselves making history. It is this last which is the ultimate rejoinder to the insidious process of infantilization.