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Dear Colleague:

Victim. Who wants to be one? The victim is presumed innocent. That's a plus, but counterposed against it is passivity and helplessness. When a student does poorly in class, I don't tell him, "Well, you are a victim of my inadequate teaching." Rather I say, "Even though circumstances are difficult for you, you can do better. You still have the power to be an agent." I am puzzled by the insistent attribution of victimhood to minority persons. If minority persons themselves wear the garb of victimhood as a political device to gain certain advantages, then I (tentatively) approve, for it may be their only way of exercising power. But when whites keep on telling me (a minority person) that I am a victim, I--for one--begin to feel pushed by the very process of labeling into a deeper mire of victimhood. To be told over and over again that I am in no way to blame removes, in the end, what residual hope I may have of being myself one day blameworthy by virtue of my power (however limited) to act. In short, to blame someone is, in a sense, to pay him a compliment--it is to say to him that he has power.

My view is admittedly influenced by Jean-Paul Sartre, an intellectual hero when I was an undergraduate. He argued for radical freedom. We are, as he would put it, "condemned to be free." Inauthenticity is a way of escaping that freedom by claiming to be what we are not--a thing of defined essence, say, a waiter, a rock star, a drug addict, a disciplined person or a dissolute person--any role at all that gives us a sense of "solidity", like a table or a tree, rather than a human being who is punishingly free to take a different step or look in a different direction, mutter under one's breath "yes" rather than "no," or "no" rather than "yes." Each motion, however small, will have a consequence. "I am a waiter." To say that and to know that that is the case is curiously comforting. "I am a victim" is even more comforting. Best of all is to be told that I am a victim, that I am never to blame, for then, and only then, am I removed totally from freedom.

But what possible freedom can there be for inmates in a Nazi concentration camp, or for slaves in an ante-bellum Southern plantation? The establishment of a Holocaust museum in the United States, but not (yet) a slavery museum, hints at an answer, which I will try to give next time.

Best wishes,

*Yi-Fu*