

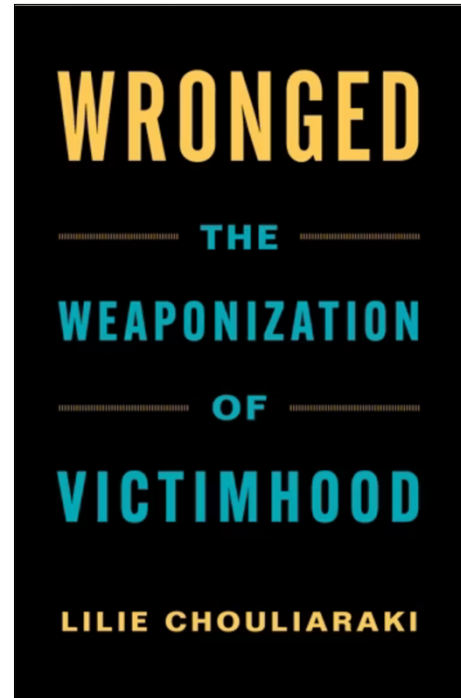
Lilie Chouliaraki, **Wronged: The Weaponization of Victimhood**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2024, 245 pp., \$120.00 (hardcover), \$30.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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Should I ever be granted the chance to hold an interview with Lilie Chouliaraki, the author of **Wronged: The Weaponization of Victimhood**, following her recent plea for vulnerability-driven interactions as a response to the dominant pain-focused discourses of our times (Bale, 2025), the first question I would certainly address would be the following: How did you manage to write in such a masterstroke way about the interrelation of vulnerability and privilege while being under the existential dread of COVID-19? Whatever the answer might be, one thing is for sure: For an author to be able to speak about this specific interrelating dynamic in such an exceptionally balanced manner means that she is not engaged in an intellectual enterprise only. It means that she acknowledges and stands firmly in her own positionality as she negotiates her ethical and political position in this world. Following this, her ideological stance is clear throughout the book: In the context of emotional capitalism, Chouliaraki is interested in envisioning and nurturing a collective kind of subjectivity, one that actively participates in processes of social transformation in the name of social justice.



Chouliaraki's engagement with the nature of mediated public discourse from an ethical and political perspective is not, of course, new. Suffering has been her focus of attention for almost two decades now. In *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (Chouliaraki, 2006), she addresses the relationship between the spectators in Western countries and the distant sufferers of mainly non-Western countries appearing on the television screen. Her astute multimodal analysis identified the hierarchy of relevance that the suffering of distant "Others" holds for Western viewers. In her subsequent book, *The Ironic Spectator* (Chouliaraki, 2013), Chouliaraki focuses on the ways the suffering of "Others" is viewed through the lens of an ethics of irony rather than of pity. The book argues that this kind of solidarity and feel-good activism is born out of a neoliberal transactional culture and is about the self and not the suffering of the others. Building on her earlier work, it is fair to say that *Wronged* raises her analytical bar even higher by shifting her theoretical focus: Now it is the West who becomes both the sufferer and the narrator of its own suffering.

In particular, dwelling on an impressive literature review, Chouliaraki offers us a timely and politically relevant work on the far right's weaponization of victimhood at the service of cruelty. Although her analysis is primarily associated with the United Kingdom and the United States, it certainly resonates

with other sociopolitical contexts as well. The key theme underpinning the book is the following crucial distinction: the difference between pain as a *systemic condition*, or vulnerability, “which defines our relative openness to violence in its various structural forms” (p. ix) and pain as a *linguistic claim*, or victimhood, “an act of communication that may be spoken from different positions of openness to violence in a continuum between vulnerability and privilege—a continuum, that is, from radical openness to relative sheltering from most forms of violence” (p. x). In building her argument, she makes her claim explicit right away: In our unequal and digitized societies, it is usually the pain of the most privileged that matters the most, and in this sense, the language of victimhood is instrumentalized to maintain structural inequalities and to legitimize the current social order.

Combining historical sensibility with analytical strength, the book features four chapters, each exploring the concept of “victimhood” from a different angle. In the first chapter, Chouliaraki sets the tone for the kind of subjectivity she puts forward in the rest of the book. As she clearly demonstrates through the analysis of Blasey Ford-Kavanaugh case, victimhood is never neutral, and it is not just about suffering. On the contrary, “claims to victimhood are claims to power” (p. 4). By providing the general framework and the theoretical background of the book, she urges us to listen to the voices of people’s pain while attending to the broader intersection of contexts within which these voices occur. This theorization escapes individualistic narratives of subject formation and seeks to address the languages of pain as a radical potential at the service of a politics of justice. In the 21st century, the line between aggressors and victims has been blurred and untangling them has been one of the most serious and politically important challenges of our times. By being attentive even to subtle structural power relations, the subjectivity that the book enacts is one that participates in a collectivist process of critical inquiry with the aim of structural changes.

The second chapter casts light on the histories of the victim and, more specifically, of the White male war victim and his soldiery suffering during the age of the major wars. From the “shell shock” of the First World War to the posttraumatic stress disorder in Vietnam to the “moral injury” in Iraq and Afghanistan, the chapter unfolds the gendered and racialized politics of pain that have come to consolidate Western conceptions of victimhood in public memory and commemorating rituals. The chapter identifies two crucial turning points that have contributed to the weaponization of victimhood today: first, the centredness of Western White male soldiers as victims at the expense of non-White soldiers and civilians and, second, the shift from the tangible wounds inflicted on the soldier’s flesh to the soldier’s “invisible” psycholegal suffering in “the age of catastrophe.” Or, as Chouliaraki expressively puts it, “White men suffer as they fight, suffer as they kill, kill as they protect, and suffer for protecting” (p. 73).

While the second chapter traces historically uneven narratives of victimhood in line with colonial and gendered hierarchies of human life, the third chapter turns to the present and, specifically, to the discourse of the Anglo-American far-right populism in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the context of the most severe health crisis we have witnessed in the 21st century, how did the two governments of Boris Johnson (United Kingdom) and Donald Trump (United States)—who had been elected to protect their people from external harm (supposedly the “corrupt elites,” the “migrants,” etc.)—manage “the challenge of communicating the suffering and death of the pandemic, largely caused by their own policies, to their national communities” (p. 77), asks Chouliaraki. Instead of relying on easy answers (e.g., through lies and

deception), the author seeks to unravel the symbolic mechanisms behind the *performance of victimhood* that scaffolded authoritarian populism and its politics of cruelty during the pandemic: normalization, militarization, and obfuscation. In a kind of “reverse victimhood,” the chapter eloquently argues that it was once again the few privileged White libertarians that were protected by these two governments at the expense of the systematically vulnerable racialized minorities and essential workers.

In a sense, the last chapter could be considered as the actual implementation of the previous more theoretical chapters. It directs our attention to the *Roe v. Wade* case in order to provide a critique of victimhood in two respects: the first involves the identification of the linguistic tropes of cruelty in public discourse with the aim of raising our awareness about the ways the vocabulary of victimhood contributes to the exercise of symbolic violence in everyday life; the second provides us with a heuristics of victimhood, a set of questions, to help us navigate the basic distinction that the book has drawn throughout between tactical suffering and systemic suffering. The chapter concludes by foregrounding and supporting an intersectional contextualization of pain, a critical approach acknowledging the pain of the most vulnerable not as a matter of victimhood but of injustice.

Chouliaraki’s stimulating and thought-provoking book makes a substantial contribution to the field of media studies. *Wronged: The Weaponization of Victimhood* will be of special interest not only to scholars in media studies but also to those interested in gender studies and feminist theory, social movements, far-right populism, critical discourse analysis, history of ideas, and affect theory. Although the book deals with a familiar concept, that of “victimhood,” it is not an easy book. Two minor points that can be raised constitute suggestions for improvement more rather than points of criticism. The first concerns readership: Since the notion of “victimhood” attracts much attention, the book would be far more reachable to a broader readership if some concepts (e.g., “humanitarianism”) were not taken for granted as familiar terminology and were explained even in a short note; second, although the author acknowledges that the politics of victimhood “has emerged across the political spectrum, from the right to the left” (p. 9), in this book, her focus lies in the far right. It would be theoretically compelling if her future analytical engagement was with left politics—and why not mainstream feminism and LGBTQ rights claims?

References

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