

INTRODUCTION: PRESIDENT'S OPENING ADDRESS

The following is an edited and revised version of the address given at the Opening Ceremony by the then President of the World Society of Victimology (WSV) and President of the Symposium Organising Committee, the Hon. C. J. Sumner.

This year's Symposium coincides with the United Nations declared Year of the Family and a significant section of the Symposium program will be devoted to this theme. 1994 is the Centenary of the introduction of Women's Suffrage to South Australia. The South Australian Parliament was one of the first in the world to grant women the right to vote and the first in the world to allow women to stand and be elected to Parliament.

In Australia there is heightened debate about the rights of Indigenous Australians and in particular, debate about the decision of the High Court of Australia in the Mabo case which in 1992 recognised that the right of Australian Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders to title to land survived European settlement.

These are all issues of contemporary relevance to victimology as we examine victimisation in families and violence against women and the continuing debate about equal opportunity for women including gender bias in the legal system. Issues surrounding Native Title and the rights of Aboriginal Australians to decent housing, health and welfare facilities and their significant over-representation in the criminal justice system, in arrest rates, court appearances and imprisonment are all relevant to our work.

I would like to make some comments about the approach taken by the Organising Committee in putting this program together. It seemed to the Organising Committee little point in having a Symposium which did not attempt to deal with the major theoretical and practical issues in victimology and to openly confront the contending points of view.

Victimology has its critics. In August 1991, *Time* magazine under the heading 'What's happening to the American character' asserted 'that it is the age of the all purpose victim'; that 'we're not to blame, we're victims' which is the 'increasingly assertive rallying cry of groups who see the American dream not as striving fulfilled but as unachieved entitlement'. It referred to a double-barrelled social phenomenon now threatening the real exercise of American civil liberties. The first barrel is victimology, the other the rights industry. 'Under the corrosive influence of victimology, the principle of individual responsibility for one's own actions, once a vaunted American virtue, seems like a relic'—the authors argued.

More recently, the Australian author and critic, Robert Hughes, who lives in New York took up the theme in his book *The Culture of Complaint*: 'since our new found sensitivity decrees only the victim shall be the hero the white

American male starts bawling for victim status too' (1993, p. 7); 'the all pervasive claim to victimhood tops off America's long cherished culture of therapeutics' (1993, p. 9); 'the range of victims available 10 years ago, blacks, chicanos, indians, women, homosexuals, has now expanded to include every permutation of the halt, the blind, the lame and the short or to put it correctly, the differently abled, the other visioned and the vertically challenged. Never before in human history were there so many acronyms pursuing identity' (1993, p. 17).

In a recent article in the *Australian* newspaper, Australian academic and commentator Beatrice Faust referred to 'the prevailing fashion for victims' and to the media creating a stereotyped Aboriginal victim 'and thereby reinforcing learned helplessness'. The argument is that there was greater value in promoting achievers rather than victims 'which is not only to provide role models for young Aborigines but also to give the white communities a new understanding of what Aborigines can achieve'.

The scene has also been set by two recent articles in Australia. Professor Richard Harding (1994, p. 27) has criticised what he sees as 'the over-reaction of the victimisation industry which has occurred in this country as in North America', which in turn provided a critical response from Sandra Egger (1994, p. 44) who argued that victim-oriented research had 'led to some important breakthroughs in our understanding of the causes of crime' and had enhanced 'the formulation of effective and just criminal justice and crime prevention policies'.

It is a little difficult to take seriously the accusation that victimology is to blame for the perceived ills of modern society. Indeed, what the authors of the *Time* magazine article are talking about is not victimology. In a global context it is impossible to deny that there is a role for the continuing attention to the effect of victimisation both in research and practical assistance. Consider the refugees in Somalia or Rwanda, or the victims of the war in the former Yugoslavia or the victims of human rights abuses in the former South Africa or Soviet Union or many other countries, and the relevance of our work becomes immediately obvious. But not all the criticisms can be so easily dismissed. For instance, the question of whether the balance of rights in the criminal justice system has been upset by society's recent response to victims of crime has to be confronted.

The Organising Committee did not wish to avoid these and other debates—indeed quite the reverse—so the Symposium is structured to encourage them. Professor Robert Elias will give a keynote address—'Paradigms and Paradoxes of Victimology'—in which he raises many of the issues and criticisms of contemporary victimology. Victimologists must be able to compete in the world of ideas and subject both their ideas and actions to critical scrutiny. Proposals that emerge from the research into victims must have a firm base and we must be able to defend our position. In this Symposium we have not sought to be 'politically correct'. We have not sought to exclude any point of view.

There are a number of reasons to support victimology both as a theoretical, academic and research-orientated discipline and a movement concerned with alleviating the suffering of people who become victims as a result of criminal acts or abuse of political or economic power. One attractive aspect is that it is multi-disciplinary, it is not narrow in scope, it deals with more than victims of

crime. If it were confined just to victims of crime then the argument that it should be subsumed into criminology might have some force. But the United Nations through its 1985 Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, has clearly recognised victimisation which goes beyond victims of conventional crime and the Symposium program has been constructed to provoke debate across a number of disciplines. Those that come from the criminal justice system will gain insights directly relevant to their work, but the exposure to a broader range of ideas including the medical consequences of victimisation, victims' experiences, service delivery and human rights will inform us all.

Rather than being a cause for criticism it seems to me that the WSV gains strength from the fact that its membership comprises theoreticians, scientists, administrators and activists. In that sense it is a unique organisation. There are important theoretical debates about the place of victimology in the social sciences—its relationship to criminology—whether it should be involved in crime victim issues only or broader issues of human rights abuses and the relationship between theory, research and practical programs. However, it is important to realise that the WSV covers all people with an interest—theoretical or practical—in victimology. The Charter of Incorporation refers to the purpose of the Society as 'to advance victimological research and practices . . .' and its members 'may include scientists, students, organisations, victim helpers, volunteers, lay persons and others'. There is no reason why victimology as a social science cannot co-exist with victimology as an activist movement. There is no reason why research activities cannot lead to concrete results to improve the situation of victims irrespective of the form of victimisation. However, we do expect our researchers to be rigorous so that victimology remains a legitimate and credible area of study. We also expect research where appropriate to be practically orientated so that the results can inform policy makers and governments about relevant programs which do in fact improve the position of the victim in the criminal justice system and elsewhere. The WSV supports theoretical discussions, practical research and social action in the interests of victims of crime and victims of abuses of human rights or corporate power.

A movement that wanted to turn everyone into a victim in order to nourish itself would hardly have credibility. It is for that reason that disparaging references to the victims industry hardly take the debate anywhere. It is the same sort of rhetoric that is used to disparage the advancement of other important ideas in our community such as multi-culturalism, or human rights.

We have tried to construct a Symposium which provides a democratic forum for rational debate. Robert Hughes said in *The Culture of Complaint* that in the 1980s one of the features of the electoral scene in the USA 'was a public recoil from formal politics, from the active reasoned exercise of citizenship'. But the survival of democracy in the long run depends on that reasoned exercise of citizenship. In the end whether ideas about victimology and any programs which flow from it are accepted depends on the functioning of the democratic process. We have an obligation to do our best to inform that democratic process.

Some criminologists refer in disparaging terms to the moral panics which they allege surround the community's approach to crime. In the end it's not the

criminologist that has to face the distraught parents of a murdered child—or has to face a public meeting of 300 people complaining about the incidence of vandalism in their town and demanding a curfew for all young people in order to curb it, or who have to sit in the meeting rooms of political parties and hear elected representatives consistently and forcefully urging that more and more be done about law and order and increasing crime rates. It is the policy makers, politicians and service providers that confront these issues at the coalface. While law and order can be manipulated for political purposes, this can only occur because of genuine community concern about levels of crime and the state's response to it.

It would have been self-indulgent to have had a program concentrate solely on victims of crime without recognising human rights abuses around the world and the tragic situations in Bosnia and Rwanda for instance. We are not here to create victims but to develop practical programs through valid research to alleviate their suffering.

References

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