

The Victims' Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind, by Bruce Bawer. New York: HarperCollins, 2012, 400 pp., \$25.99 hardbound.

Victims as Victimizers

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Professors who read *Academic Questions* do not need to read this book as much as their students do. In *The Victims' Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind*, Bruce Bawer confirms what many have long known or suspected: most of what happens in “identity” studies is pseudo-intellectual because its goals are nonintellectual. Some scholars are in it for the politics, others to hustle money and a career out of ideologically sympathetic or guilt-laden or cowardly administrators,

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still others for personal therapy (especially but not limited to fat studies).

Caveat emptor, college students: if you want to learn about race (blacks or “Chicanos” and racist whites), gender (women and patriarchal men), class (secondhand Marx—but don't expect to learn about the tens of millions of victims of Communism worldwide), sexuality (“queers”), the disabled, or the fat, often the worst way to learn is to take a studies course. The good courses on these subjects, when they exist, are most often found in the traditional disciplines, where scholars must at least meet the standards of those disciplines.

Yet many of these disciplines have been overcome by the victims' revolution, too. Historians or literary scholars with politically incorrect ideas too often are pushed out on pretexts about academic quality, or else they remain closeted before and after tenure. Academic work that used to be countercultural is now utterly common, while presuppositions about patriarchy and other kinds of “oppression” guide research agendas and preordain research outcomes.

Bawer has read key textbooks, anthologies, and academic works in the studies areas, attended academic

conferences, and interviewed academic leaders. He has suffered through many restatements of nearly impenetrable “theory,” discovering that studies proponents tend to rely on cryptic in-group language in order to seem academically sophisticated. Sad to say, most of Bawer’s research reinforced his diagnosis of the ills pervading these studies.

From an academic perspective, the worst of these are the illogical inconsistencies—for example, one regularly hears that men and women are equal except when women are better and men are worse, but stereotypes are unacceptable. Then there are the radically unsupported claims such as those about black Egyptians launching Greek philosophy. Other ills include exaggerated attention to past grievances, rigid orthodoxies, treating students as impressionable waifs who need to learn about how oppressed they are, privileging feelings over rationality or throwing out rationality altogether, navel-gazing, hucksterism, hiding lack of substance under a haystack of “theory” language, and the essentialism of treating individuals primarily as members of an oppressed group.

At conferences, Bawer experienced endless circling around the same grievances and superficialities. One of the most common rediscoveries was “intersectionality”—that a

person’s life is defined by multiple identities and the oppressions or privileges that come with each one. Shouldn’t the investigation of the experiences of heavy black lesbians with disabilities differ from the investigation of the experiences of heavy black lesbians with disabilities and a Chicano grandparent?

Bawer only once encountered the logical conclusion of “intersectionality”: each person is a unique function of his identities and can never be fully described through identity studies. Not only does each person have a race, gender, religion, hometown, family, job status, and so on, but each person also weighs and values those identities differently and has interacted with untold others in unique ways. Bawer found such a conclusion not among any of the studies scholars or in their writings but in an interview with University of Pennsylvania professor Alan Charles Kors, who dissolves a dozen courses’ worth of identity studies social and political rhetoric with five sentences when he gives campus speeches:

It’s the right of every free individual to decide the relative importance or unimportance of their race, sex, and sexuality. No one has a right to invade the inner sanctum of your conscience. The promise of this country has been

to include everybody in the circle of equal rights. Groups have struggled to enter that circle. No one who tells you that you are too weak to live with freedom is your friend.¹

And with that, the so-called victims find a bit of true empowerment.

The irony, as Bawer points out, is that the so-called victims have tremendous power in American universities. Their revolution succeeded. Administrators buckled and created studies departments to put an end to the sit-ins, hunger strikes, and outright violence that succeeded where academic persuasion did not. Administrators still walk on eggshells before the “oppressed” groups, both inside and outside the classroom, even when they agree ideologically with the studies professors. Universities hire growing armies of associate administrators to improve “inclusiveness,” to sit on faculty hiring committees, and to add “commitment to diversity” to job descriptions. When someone speaks out of line, such as when in 2005 Harvard president Lawrence Summers commented about possible reasons for differences in gender representation at the highest levels of science achievement, the arts and

sciences faculty go wild (some nearly black out or vomit when hearing such heresy, as an MIT faculty member said).

Similarly, when Summers complained that Cornel West’s rap album exemplified his relative “failure to produce any scholarly or critical work of substance” as a Harvard professor, West mostly won the public battle and was welcomed into Princeton.² Meanwhile, Bawer reports, when a truly serious scholar is offered an appointment at Harvard’s W.E.B. Du Bois Institute, the scholar will insist on a joint appointment in a traditional discipline.

But such stories are old hat to *Academic Questions* readers. *The Victims’ Revolution*’s appeal is mainly for students, parents, trustees, and others who never knew about or had forgotten the culture wars that transformed most American universities. Even so, those who abandoned the culture wars for more productive pursuits will appreciate Bawer’s update, his introduction to some of the worst patterns of discourse in studies fields, and his identification of key texts and their biases.

Furthermore, academics who have taken studies arguments seriously will find, in this book, many reminders of the core rhetorical claims and

¹Bruce Bawer, *The Victims’ Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012), 336.

²*Ibid.*, 150.

contradictions within studies areas. Bawer is particularly interested in women's studies, giving eighty pages to the topic. While Bawer offers support for the waves of feminism that led to women's suffrage and equal rights, he draws the line at feminists who are simply hostile to men, reject rationality as phallogentric, or (like Andrea Dworkin) identify intercourse as an example of women's oppression. Bawer can agree with Betty Friedan's challenges to "rigid gender roles," but not her equation of housewives' homes with "concentration camps."

Although Bawer sometimes describes studies arguments only to let them hang out for ridicule, he takes other arguments seriously and addresses them. For example, he considers why so many young Western feminists turn a blind eye to the extreme patriarchy of the Middle East, privileging multiculturalism over women's rights and undermining their own principles. He discerns, at a National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) conference, that

it's politically incorrect to concern [oneself] overmuch with the violent oppression and abuse of women in non-Western cultures, and...if one does...it's obligatory to find some way to blame them on Western colonialism.³

³Ibid., 52.

Bawer later finds this theme in a women's studies course at a state university, a course he analyzes at length. Thus, the chapter forms a particularly good introduction to the moral and rational fissures in the field for people who haven't been through all of this many times already, and the same holds true for the shorter chapters about black, queer, Chicano, disability, and fat studies.

Perhaps it is true, as I will venture to estimate, that the bottom 50 to 75 percent of scholarship in the humanities and social sciences is barely worth reading or publishing, and that 80 percent of conference papers also fall into that category. After reading *The Victims' Revolution*, I think Bawer would estimate the numbers coming out of studies departments at 99-plus percent, and I see no reason to disagree. Bawer attended dozens of conference sessions and has reported on many of them in agonizing detail.

To conclude his critique more persuasively for an academic audience, I wish Bawer had examined the most current articles from top journals in these areas. The generally journalistic style of the book means that it will not get the play such a critique still deserves on campus. Once awakened by *The Victims' Revolution*, trustees who become ready to ask hard questions about academic quality need better tools. If peer review has

failed to keep studies disciplines accountable, is there any better alternative?

Besides, campus orthodoxies leave few places for such a book. I doubt the next NWSA conference will include a panel on Bawer's critique. Or consider the academic mobbing of University of Texas professor Mark Regnerus, described in "The Regnerus Affair at UT Austin" in July 2012 by NAS president Peter Wood. Regnerus was investigated by the University of Texas because of vigorous complaints about the published results of his study showing significant differences among the adult children of parents who had, or who had not, been strictly heterosexual. Those who attacked Regnerus expect to

intimidate other scholars and editors from risking expressions that might rouse similar ire. These are tactics of force and

brute power, lightly veiled in the rhetoric of concern for scientific integrity....Researchers take note. Publish only findings that support the gay agenda. Departures from that rule will be punished up to and including career-ending academic show trials.⁴

After five years defending faculty members through the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, where I worked until recently, I can attest that the essentials of the Regnerus case are far from unique. One cannot challenge the orthodoxies and privileges of the "victims," even on academic grounds, without facing sustained ad hominem attacks and pretextual arguments about the quality of one's critique. This is because the victims' revolution succeeded, and the oppressed have for a generation been the oppressors.

⁴Peter Wood, "The Regnerus Affair at UT Austin," National Association of Scholars, July 24, 2012, http://www.nas.org/articles/the_regnerus_affair_at_ut_austin. Reprinted from *Chronicle of Higher Education, Innovations* (blog), July 15, 2012, <http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/the-regnerus-affair-at-ut-austin/33509>.