

Collective Guilt for Everyone for Everything

Here's an excerpt from my book-in-progress, *Poverty: Who To Blame*.

After “Don’t blame the victim,” the second-most obvious maxim for blame is, “Only blame the perpetrators.” Precisely who, though, are the “perpetrators”? Another deep criticism of my approach is that I blame too narrowly. Instead of concentrating blame on specific wrong-doers, we should blame large swaths of society – or even whole countries. To my ears, this echoes a blood-curdling passage from *Deuteronomy*:

If you hear it said about one of the towns the Lord your God is giving you to live in that troublemakers have arisen among you and have led the people of their town astray, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” (gods you have not known), then you must inquire, probe and investigate it thoroughly. And if it is true and it has been proved that this detestable thing has been done among you, you must certainly put to the sword all who live in that town. You must destroy it completely, both its people and its livestock.[i]

While most moderns would deny any affinity, the Deuteronomic mentality is alive and well. In wartime, citing an offending government’s actions to rationalize collective punishment of its citizens is the default. Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, so the people of Japan have only themselves to blame when we firebomb Tokyo. Hamas won’t make peace with Israel, so the inhabitants of the Gaza strip have only themselves to blame for the ongoing blockade. Israel won’t leave the West Bank, so Israeli citizens have only themselves to blame for terrorist attacks. Even in peacetime, though, collective blame occasionally surfaces. Many wish to exclude immigrants because of the crimes of a handful of people from the same country or religion. And in recent years, collective blame for “structural” or “institutional” racism and sexism has become common in progressive spaces – especially college campuses. The core idea is that a white male can’t hold himself blameless for racism and sexism merely because he personally is neither racist nor sexist.

Can an idea with such broad appeal really be wrong? What is telling is that barely anyone endorses all or even most appeals to collective blame. Those who invoke it do so *selectively*. Indeed, they normally invoke it nepotistically; when *my* cause or *my* group suffers, we are entitled to blame loosely. Historian Stephen Roberts once quipped: “I

contend that we are both atheists. I just believe in one fewer god than you do. When you understand why you dismiss all the other possible gods, you will understand why I dismiss yours.” Similarly, I contend that those who insist that “We are all guilty” dismiss almost as many forms of collective blame as I do. I just dismiss their carve-outs too.

[i] *Deuteronomy* 13:12-15. These are odd injunctions even in the context of fanatical religious intolerance. At least *some* adults in an entire town would have remained true to Yahweh; and what about townsfolk too young (or too senile) to detect apostasy? Later books of the Bible take these questions to heart, firmly switching from collective to individual responsibility:

Yet you ask, “Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?” Since the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to keep all my decrees, he will surely live. The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them. (*Ezekiel* 18:19-20)