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The reverse victimisation of Charlie Kirk – from propagandist to martyr

In the aftermath of Charlie Kirk's assassination, Donald Trump, JD Vance and other prominent figures of the American right were quick to proclaim him a conservative martyr, the victim of cancel culture and woke prosecution. In the UK, Tommy Robinson used Kirk's legacy to mobilise his "Unite the Kingdom march". Lilie Chouliaraki argues that the creation of Charlie Kirk as a totemic figure of the far right is a classic example of the recasting of those with power and influence as victims.

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The horrific [assassination of Charlie Kirk](#) at Utah Valley University less than two weeks ago reverberated not only through far-right and conservative circles but across liberal and progressive public spheres around the world. And rightly so. It was, in human terms, a tragedy; in political terms, disastrous; and in moral terms, indefensible. Political violence is not the answer. And the killing of Kirk was beyond the pale.

What raises questions, however, is what followed. Within hours, Donald Trump declared on social media that Kirk was "[great](#)" and even "[legendary](#)" and, in his funeral, JD Vance called him a "[hero](#)" of the United States of America and a "[martyr of the Christian faith](#)". Days after, the right wing activist [Tommy Robinson used Charlie Kirk's assassination](#) to mobilise support for his London rally, which he dubbed "[the UK's biggest free speech festival](#)". During the "[Unite the Kingdom](#)" march itself, [demonstrators raised placards](#) with images of Charlie Kirk and banners with words of adoration for him. Conservative broadcasters replayed the blurred images of the shooting accompanied by swelling patriotic music.

During that short time, Kirk turned from the propagandist he had been in life to a fallen hero, a conservative martyr whose death was recast as proof of [the "cancel culture" and "woke persecution"](#) that, many on his side claim, silences conservative voices. This is how [reverse](#)

victimisation works. It transforms figures of authority into symbols of injury and rewrites the story of who holds power and who suffers from it.

How those with the most power claim to be silenced

Kirk's legacy in public life was not that of a marginal dissenter silenced by progressive "orthodoxy." He was a prominent voice of symbolic violence, a man with the political authority and social media reach to use rhetoric so as to target women, migrants, queer communities and people of colour; he thrived in a culture of antagonism and celebrated guns as instruments of freedom – the irony, of course, being that Kirk himself fell victim to that very gun violence he had so forcefully defended. His speeches spread an ethos of aggression and his arguments naturalised supremacist hierarchies of domination as "common sense." On abortion, his stance was shocking. "Abortion is murder and should be illegal," he declared, even in the case of child rape. When asked what he would do if his ten-year-old daughter was raped and became pregnant, his response was, "The answer is yes, the baby would be delivered."

Kirk was not silenced in life. He enjoyed a vast platform and exercised his huge influence to vilify those already at the margins. He was an architect of what I call, following my argument in *Wronged*, a symbolic politics of cruelty: acts of speech that displace the pain of the vulnerable onto those who violate them with a view to continuing their violence and legitimising their domination. And yet, in death, Kirk's violent words are being recast as if they were the truths of an honest conservative practicing the democratic tradition of open deliberation.



In the logic of reverse victimisation, those who enjoy domination become martyrs, while those who are marginalised are cast as perpetrators.



This reversal matters. It sanitises Kirk's record and erases the harm of his politics. Worse than that, it frames his assassination within a broader narrative: that conservatives are the "real victims" of an intolerant left. In this story, his death is not a warning about the risks of political radicalisation but proof that free speech itself is under siege. The danger of such inversion becomes clearer when we

place it within the broader rise of nationalist, authoritarian politics across the West. Contrary to the myth of “**woke** **tyranny**,” it is not the radical left that dominates the cultural and political stage. In **politics, business, and technology**, it is the far right that is rising. From the United States and Israel to Russia and India, far-right politics is not silenced. It is governing. Meanwhile, it is those already vulnerable who face persecution: migrants deported, NGOs and community centres intimidated, critical media voices silenced and academics punished with funding cuts or career threats under the charge of “**antisemitism**” whenever they dare to criticise Israel. This is a politics of cruelty that makes clear where power really lies.

It is against this politics that Kirk’s popularity, and the mythology built around his death, must be understood. His discourse resonated because it tapped into an affective economy already shaping much of social life around the glorification of hardened machismo; the celebration of big tech regardless of human cost; the normalisation of climate retreat as the price for “**progress**”. It is a worldview steeped in masculinist fantasies of invincibility and disdain for vulnerability, altruism, or solidarity.

The mythmaking of a new martyr

The staging of Kirk’s funeral consolidated this mythology that casts the far Right as both victim and victor; a body politic **wounded by tragedy yet still powerful**, rallying in its claim to moral authority and promising more political violence. Trump praised him for doing “**a tremendous job**” and Vance for his exemplary stance teaching the nation “**to stand on our feet defending the United States of America**” rather than “**to die on our knees**.” Television screens were filled with flags, hymns, and solemn pledges that his “**sacrifice**” would not be in vain. The service became less an act of mourning than **a political rally**: a moment to weaponize grief in order to advance a menacing narrative of conservative victimhood. In the logic of **reverse victimisation**, those who enjoy domination become martyrs, while those who are marginalised are cast as perpetrators.

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Refusing this reversal does not minimise the horror of Kirk's assassination. Violence is indefensible, and his killing must be condemned as a tragic loss of life. But mourning should not collapse into myth-making. When it does, it legitimises precisely the structures of domination that Kirk's rhetoric helped advance. It normalises exclusion, hierarchy and cruelty by enveloping them in the aura of sacrifice. In *Wronged*, I describe how this kind of far-right weaponization of victimhood works as a bid for power and I argue that this strategy not only distorts reality but also seeks to reconfigure public sympathy away from the oppressed and towards their oppressors. Kirk's posthumous canonisation is a textbook case. It is a performance that re-centres white, male, conservative pain, while silencing the structural injustices inflicted on suffering others. It is a politics that, in the guise of mourning, deepens the harms of patriarchy, racism, and exclusion. And this is not a phenomenon confined to the US or a peculiarity of American politics. Kirk has already become a totemic figure for the far right internationally, his image travelling across borders as a rallying point for reactionary forces – as [Tommy Robinson's recent "free speech" march](#) demonstrated.

The task, then, is to resist the seduction of martyrdom and insist on narrating this moment truthfully. We do not live under the tyranny of the left. We live in the ascendancy of a radical right. The silenced are not conservative pundits with global platforms but those repeatedly targeted by their words. Kirk's funeral sought to inscribe him as a legend in the collective consciousness. But legends are not necessarily innocent, they can also be weapons. And if we allow this myth of martyrdom to go unchallenged, we risk misrecognising the real relations of violence in our world. Or, worse, becoming complicit in their perpetuation.

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Lilie Chouliaraki is Professor and Chair in Media and Communications in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. Her recent work focuses on the politics of victimhood in the context of emotional capitalism, social media platforms and far-right populism. She is the author of the award-winning book *Wronged: The Weaponization of Victimhood* (Columbia University Press 2024).

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