

When Envy Becomes a Political Weapon



Rainer Zitelmann

Aug 24, 2025

The opinions expressed by columnists are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of Townhall.com.

Envy is the most downplayed of all human emotions, often denied and concealed. No one likes to admit that they are envious. Rather, they prefer to believe it is an emotion experienced exclusively by others.

Acknowledging envy implies that the target of envy possesses something desirable – something that the envious person doesn't have. This realization can provoke uncomfortable questions about the envious person's own self-esteem: is the person I envy perhaps more intelligent, diligent, or creative than me?

Historically, envy was considered one of the seven deadly sins. Today, envy has to be masked in order to be accepted, preferably reframed as a virtue: "This is not about envy, it's about social justice."

The very idea that envy is inherently destructive is often disputed. Is there not a form of "positive envy" that spurs people on? Isn't envy a motivating force that pushes people to better themselves? The confusion surrounding the term often arises from its everyday usage. For example, when I say, "I envy you for having such a beautiful house," what I truly mean is admiration, not envy. Genuine envy does not inspire self-improvement; rather, it seeks to diminish the status of the envied individual. An envious person does not aspire to close the gap between themselves and the person they envy through personal growth but by worsening the situation of the other person. For someone experiencing envy, seeing the target of their envy become more and more unhappy is all the satisfaction they could ever need.

Envy has always existed, as the sociologist Helmut Schoeck famously noted. In the past, however, societies tried to curb envy because it was perceived as a destructive emotion. But socialists have discovered just how useful an emotion and potent a tool envy can be, consistently inciting, fomenting, and instrumentalizing envy against the “rich” for their own political gain. Envy has become a political weapon. And their strategy is proving particularly effective in societies that uphold equality as an ideal. Because in such societies, inequality is perceived as a indication and manifestation of injustice. Increasingly, the terms “inequality” and “injustice” are used as synonyms.

Of course, envy is not always related to wealth. Anyone who stands out as above-average in some way, shape, or form can become a target of envy. In my novel *2075. Wenn Schönheit zum Verbrechen wird* (2075: When Beauty Became a Crime), I conduct the following thought experiment: What would happen if a political movement emerged and it was not interested in addressing material inequality but the supposed “injustice” that some people are more physically attractive than others?

Recommended



Bill Maher Nails Why Trump Connects With Voters...and Dems Won't Like It

Matt Vespa



Trump Won't Let Pinko Jerks Who Hate America Define American History

Kurt Schlichter

It is obvious, for example, that beautiful women have a better chance of finding a partner. Attractiveness research has found that beautiful people also enjoy advantages in their professional lives. Even in the courtroom,

they are treated more leniently than their less attractive peers (the word “ugly” is considered taboo today and is therefore rarely used).

And this is where an egalitarian movement comes in, claiming that “Beauty is Unfair.” According to the program of this movement, beauty is an undeserved privilege, comparable to inherited wealth. Because, according to these egalitarians, beauty confers advantages in life, even though it is not the product of performance or achievement, and is often based on luck and genes.

Among the “wokerati,” privilege is viewed as reprehensible. And anyone who is somehow better off than the so-called “underprivileged” is classified as privileged. This discourse has even led to the creation of a page dedicated to “Pretty Privilege” on Wikipedia.

The underlying assertion within this narrative is that something must be done to offset the impact of “undeserved” privileges. The “privileged” must suffer some form of disadvantage in order to restore justice (i.e. more equality). Billionaires must be subject to exorbitant taxes, preferably to the point that there are no more billionaires left.

In my fictional work 2075, all women between the ages of 15 and 40 are required to undergo annual body scans. Artificial intelligence then assesses these scans against a predetermined ideal of beauty. Those who achieve a 95 percent or higher match are labeled as “Privileged Beauties” (PBs).

The “Movement for Optical Justice” (MOJ) emerges and, like all extremist movements, it initially rears its head at universities. It is not long before the “Justice Party” recognizes the potential of this issue and begins to exploit envy for its own electoral gain. The Justice Party adds demands for “optical justice” and the eradication of the “unearned privileges” of the “overly-beautiful” to its political agenda. Once in power, the Justice Party begins to implement anti-PB policies, starting with higher taxes, reduced salaries, and lower grades on university assignments for PB women.

But it doesn't stop there. As we know from real-world history, movements that advocate for equality quickly radicalize and become ever more extreme. In my novel, this is also what happens with the "Movement for Optical Justice" – the most radical members seize control. They want to tackle the root of the problem. Under the Justice Party regime, young women identified as "overly-beautiful" at the age of 15 are forced to undergo government-mandated surgery to align their facial features with societal averages. In keeping with political correctness, this practice is euphemistically named "Optical Optimization Therapy" and the term "forced surgery" is banned.

Perhaps I made a mistake when I speculated that we'd have to wait until 2075 to see envy mobilized against the beautiful. The uproar that recently broke out over an ad featuring U.S. actress Sydney Sweeney — followed by a debate that pulled in Vice President J.D. Vance and eventually Trump himself — is a perfect reflection of today's culture of envy. Ostensibly, the controversy was about supposed racism, but at its core it centered on a beautiful woman and her sexual magnetism. Writing in the conservative British daily *The Daily Telegraph*, Caroline Downey argued that the woke left simply wants everything to be ugly, which is why they despise Sydney Sweeney.

The notion of harnessing envy, one of humanity's most basic emotions, for political ends is tempting — and it keeps working, whether aimed at the rich or at beautiful women.

Rainer Zitelmann is the author of THE RICH IN PUBLIC

OPINION <https://therichinpublicopinion.com/>