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The Politics of Anger

Qinyi Luo

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by

Qinyi Luo

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ABSTRACT

Recently, philosophers have been giving increasing attention to the place of anger in politics.

Many defenders of anger focused on the question of whether the feeling and expression of anger

are appropriate or justified as individual responses to social injustices, but in this paper, I suggest

that anger should also be viewed and critically examined as a social ethos. I further point out that

weaponizing anger as means to political ends, or what I call "the politics of anger," has an

important limitation: it risks obstructing the cultivation of empathy society-wide that is vital for

working across differences in a heterogeneous society. Philosophers and activists alike should

take this limitation into serious consideration when defending the role of anger in politics,

especially under circumstances where there are other political alternatives that might be as

appropriate and effective as appealing to anger.

INDEX WORDS: Anger, Antagonism, Emotion, Political emotion, Polarization, Empathy

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by

Qinyi Luo

Committee Chair: Peter Lindsay

Committee: S.M. Love

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College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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To my friends in Hong Kong. You taught me courage and love.

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1   INTRODUCTION

In the book *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, Arlie R. Hochschild tells the story of Mike Schaff, a 64-year-old Tea Party supporter who became an environmental activist after a sinkhole was created in his neighborhood near Bayou Corne, Lousiana, due to the misperformance of a drilling company, which led to the displacement of more than 300 residents. Hochschild notes how emotionally charged Mike was when he spoke about the incident in public: each time, he placed his hand over his mouth and spoke with a cracked voice. But Mike didn't like weeping in front of the public. "I pray one day I will be able to speak with no tears, just anger," he said.[1]

Many social activists are like Mike: they are emotionally invested in the causes that they care about, and they articulate their emotions as they advocate for these causes. Their emotions are often mixed: anger, sadness, fear… but it's interesting that Mike would like to express only anger and no other emotions in public. This of course has to do with – as Hochschild indicates in the book – the traditional gender stereotypes associated with different emotions, such as weeping being unmanly.[2] But it also coincides with the recent scholarly trend that emphasizes the role of anger in politics. There has been heated scholarly debates on the pros and cons of political anger: defenders of anger take it to be a fitting response to social injustices and praise it for its motivational role in bringing about social change, while critics of anger are keen on warning us about its destructive potential.

I shall suggest in this paper, however, that there is one dimension of anger that is largely neglected in the contemporary debate. In addition to discussing the fittingness of anger and its

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[1] Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, 195.
[2] He told Hochschild that "Southern men don't cry" (Ibid., 195).

effects for individuals, I suggest that we should also pay attention to the context in which it is expressed and the scale of its influence society-wide. Many theorists – defenders and critics alike – tend to view anger only as an individual emotional response to social injustices, and in doing so, they overlook how individual expressions of anger may contribute to a collective social environment characterized by hostility and antagonism, which would in turn shape different individuals' perception and understanding of their social reality. Anger sparks anger – and this is true for both those who are sympathetic to the initial anger, and those who are the targets of that anger. In Bishop Joseph Butler's sermons, he observes that resentment has the tendency to propagate itself as it incites the same emotion in its target, which again increases the initial resentment, forming a vicious circle.[3] The same may be said of anger. Arguably, many of us are living in societies characterized by inter-group hostility and antagonism. Political scientists have found that the United States and some countries in Europe are becoming increasingly polarized – not only in terms of the different beliefs that each partisan group holds, but also in terms of intergroup antipathy.[4]

While many philosophers focus on the positive role that anger may play in progressive movements, it is important not to forget that anger is a neutral tool that can be deployed by different parties for various political purposes. Former U.S. President Donald Trump, for instance, is an expert on mobilizing anger to achieve his political goals. A *New York Times* study shows that among 11,000 of his Twitter posts, more than half are attacks.[5] This emotional

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[3] Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 97.
[4] Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States," 129–46; Boxell et al., "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization," 1-60; Hobolt et al., "Divided by the Vote: Affective Polarization in the Wake of the Brexit Referendum," 1476–93.
[5] Shear et al. "How Trump reshaped the presidency in over 11,000 Tweets."

strategy has helped him attract supporters, who are often as angry as him and at times violent.[6]

His term saw the rise of the Proud Boys, a far-right group that advocates political violence. The

group was active in the storming of the Capitol building on 6 Jan, 2021, which resulted in 138

injured and at least two dead.

If we bear in mind anger's propensity to incite more anger and how this might be used by

different groups – including extremist groups – then, when we consider justifications for political

anger, it is important to consider how the expressions of anger function in a particular political

context. An activist like Mike wanting to express anger towards a single corporation that is

responsible for an environmental disaster in front of a small, uninformed crowd, is very different

from a president like Trump expressing his anger and calling for violence on a twitter account

that has millions of followers. The difference has to do in part with the fittingness and the style

and manner of the anger, but in part also the scale of influence, and how it shapes the social

environment. In Trump's case, we may say that he is promoting what I call the "politics of

anger." This, I argue, is different from individual expressions of anger, although the two are not

unrelated. I argue that when we consider whether we should express anger, we should consider

its potential impact in forming or promoting a politics of anger on a wider social scale. This is

important because, as I will argue, the politics of anger has an important limitation: it risks

obstructing the cultivation of empathy, which I take to be an important political virtue in a

heterogeneous society. While my argument does not entail an all-things-considered rejection of

the politics of anger, I suggest that philosophers and activists alike should take its limitation into

serious consideration when defending the role of anger in politics, especially under

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[6] For analysis, see for instance, Hochschild's commentary on *The Guardian*, "The Secret to Donald Trump's Electoral Strategy? Emotion, Not Policy," and her interview on *The Atlantic*, "The Deep Story of Trumpism," as well as Wahl-Jorgensen, "Media coverage of shifting emotional regimes: Donald Trump's angry populism."

circumstances where there are other political alternatives that might be as appropriate and effective as appealing to anger.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 summarizes scholarly debates surrounding the feeling and expression of anger in response to social injustices. I suggest that a conception of "politics of anger" is needed to address the gaps in the existing literature. Section 3 delineates such a conception. Section 4 provides a critique of the politics of anger, on the ground that it obstructs the cultivation of the capacity of empathy societal-wide. I conclude with a few remarks on the implications of my view.

2   DEBATES ON ANGER

There is a vast body of literature within the tradition of Black and feminist thought that emphasizes the epistemic and motivational role of anger. Part of what motivates the literature, I think, is the recognition that the silencing and suppression of anger can become a powerful tool to maintain domination. bell hooks, for instance, recounts how black people in the community that she grew up in learned to choke down their rage because any expression of rage or any challenge to the white supremacist order might be seen as dangerous and could bring harm to those who dared to express it.[7] Apart from the fear of the consequences of challenging the societal order, some members of the oppressed group also deny their anger as they internalize the status quo. Naomi Scheman, in describing women's experience in the "consciousness-raising groups" – meeting groups popular in the 1970s that provided a safe environment for women to share their personal experiences and discuss feminist ideas – notes how common it is for women to deny that they felt anger because they deny that their anger was justified.[8]

The notion that anger can be either justified or unjustified finds its root in the understanding that anger registers a moral judgment that a wrong has been done. Aristotle commends people who are angry at "things that ought to make them angry" (*NE* IV.v.1126a5),[9] and Bishop Butler similarly suggests that anger originates from a recognition of moral evil (he specifically emphasizes that this is distinct from natural evil).[10] The other side of this point,

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[7] hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, 13–4.
[8] Scheman, "Anger and the Politics of Naming," 176–7.
[9] Translations of *The Nicomachean Ethics* in this paper are by J.A.K. Thompson (Penguin Classics, 2003).
[10] Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 92–3.

however, as noted by both authors, is that one's anger is unjustified when there has been no moral injury.[11]

When anger of the oppressed is widely seen as unjustified, then, the implied message is that there is nothing wrong with the social structure. It was under this context that many theorists began to argue anger is a proper response to social injustices. Being able to recognize that one has been angry, these critics suggest, may in itself constitute a liberating experience. As Jerome Neu remarks: "…how one conceives, perceives, and understands the world will in large measure determine how one experiences it. And how one understands oneself will affect who one is."[12] When we deny our feeling the name of anger, we see ourselves as being unreasonable and overreacting: what needs to change here is not the state of affairs in the world, but rather us. When we attribute to our feeling the legitimate name of anger, on the other hand, we acquire a new understanding of ourselves as victims of injustices: we begin to see the world as unjust and needing to be changed; we begin to think that there *should be* other ways of life that are better than the existing one. The recognition of one's own anger allows one to perceive things differently and to imagine other ways of life – and this is in itself liberating.

For many commentators, anger also registers a uniquely fitting response to the unjust reality, as compared with other emotions. Macalester Bell, for instance, argues that anger can be "an especially fitting and appropriately expressive response" in some circumstances, as compared with other negative emotions such as disappointment and sadness.[13] More recently, Amia Srinivasan makes a similar remark when she suggests that anger entails not only a

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[11] Aristotle thinks that anger should not be evoked "for the wrong reason" (*NE* IV.v.1126a10–11), while Butler suggests that anger can be abused when there is no real reason for someone to be angry (*The Works of Bishop Butler*, 93).

[12] Neu, "Emotions and Freedom," 178.

[13] Bell, "Anger, Virtue, and Oppression," 177-8.

knowledge of injustice but also an *appreciation* of it, which makes anger distinctively valuable as an apt response to social injustices.[14]

Theorists have also pointed out the important role of anger in motivating political changes. People have long observed that anger prompts those who suffer from injustice to defend themselves and rectify the injustice.[15] Based on these action tendencies associated with anger, many contemporary theorists have argued that anger can be particularly useful in fighting structural injustice.[16]

However, while anger *can* be liberating, fitting, and motivating, critics of anger have warned us that the dark sides of anger cannot be neglected. Psychological research has shown that people who are angry are more certain about their judgments of the circumstance and therefore less likely to consider different aspects of the circumstance and question their initial judgments.[17] Anger also has spill-over effects: researchers have found that anger affects people's perceptions of events that are unrelated to the original event,[18] and can cause people to misattribute blame to people who may have nothing to do with the wrongdoing or overestimate the responsibility that the "out-group" should bear.[19]

A conclusion that we may draw from these studies is that although learning to recognize one's anger may be liberating, once anger becomes a pattern and a default response in similar events, one may lose sight of the complexity and nuance of these events. Of course, there are clear incidences of racist assaults or sexual offences, but there are also more complex, borderline

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[14] Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," 132.
[15] See e.g., Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*, 95 & 99.
[16] See e.g., hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*; Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism"; Cherry, *The Case for Rage.*
[17] Thiel, Connelly, Griffith, "The Influence of Anger on Ethical Decision Making: Comparison of Primary and Secondary Appraisal," 380–403.
[18] Lerner and Tiedens, "Portrait of the Angry Decision Maker," 116.
[19] Mackie, Devos, and Smith, "Intergroup Emotions: Explaining Offensive Action Tendencies in an Intergroup Context," 119–32.

cases that call for a more careful analysis. As Sukaina Hirji notes, a common critique of the #MeToo movement is that it "lumped in serial rapist and horrific abuses of power alongside clumsy or unsuccessful communication around sexual boundaries."[20] Hirji suggests that a result of this is that the punishment that some of the people received was disproportionate to their actual or alleged offenses. While anger towards egregious sexual offenses is fitting, it can become unfitting if it spills over to other cases that require a more nuanced judgment.

Furthermore, there are reasons to question whether even fitting anger may not be all-things-considered justifiable. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith distinguishes between two different kinds of judgments, which he calls "judgment of propriety" and "judgment of merit": the "judgment of propriety" evaluates an act based on the causes that lead to it, whereas the "judgment of merit" evaluates an act based on the consequences it produces.[21] Using Smith's terms, we may say that the judgment about the fittingness of certain anger is only a judgment of propriety, and to make a thorough judgment of that anger, we must also consider its consequences. This is also acknowledged by Srinivasan, who, in defending the importance of recognizing the aptness of anger, cautions that her account is not an "all-things-considered" account of when anger is justified. A fuller account, she indicates, would need to include considerations of political efficacy.[22]

If the defenders of anger wish to provide a thorough justification for deploying anger in politics, then, they need to address the potentially destructive aspects of anger that critics point out. Some of the defenders thus specify that they endorse only a particular type of anger that does not bring about worrying consequences. Lucas Swaine, for instance, develops the concept

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[20] Hirji, "Outrage and the Bounds of Empathy," 15.
[21] Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 18.
[22] Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," 132.

of "situational anger" for the type of anger that does not place blame on any person or group, but is directed only toward unjust situations – he suggests that this is the kind of anger that is useful and constructive in political life.[23] More recently, Myisha Cherry draws on Audre Lorde's writing on anger and theorizes a kind of rage – which she calls "Lordean rage" – that "does not preclude other emotional and cognitive responses like compassion and empathy."[24] She argues that it is this kind of rage that is particularly useful against the backdrop of racial injustice.

I think an "all-things-considered" defense of the *expression* of anger (not merely the *feeling* of it) is the strongest when the permissible anger is limited to a particular kind. However, in restricting justifiable anger to a specific kind, these scholars seem to focus only on individual expressions of anger: while it is possible for an individual or even a small community to stick to a specific kind of anger, it is highly difficult, if not at all impossible, to ensure that all individuals in a sufficiently large group restrict themselves to the best kind of anger, given how demanding this is.[25] If our goal is to examine anger's place in politics and its impact on society-wide injustices, however, it is not enough to consider in isolation the individual cases of anger. I suggest that we must also think of anger as a social ethos.[26] Apart from considering whether the *feeling* of anger is fitting or constructive in individual cases, we should also consider the impact of the *expressions* of anger, especially when they are widespread within a society in a prolonged timeframe. To this purpose, I suggest that apart from understanding anger as an individual subjective emotion, we also need an account of what I call the "politics of anger."

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[23] Swaine, "Blameless, Constructive, and Political Anger."

[24] Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 5.

[25] Cherry, for instance, in distinguishing Lordean anger from other pernicious forms of anger, also cautions that different types of anger "can overlap, even run into or transition to the others" (*The Case for Rage*, 15).

[26] In this sense, my approach to non-anger resembles Judith Butler's approach to non-violence, where she insists that non-violence is not a moral principle adopted by individuals, but rather a social and political way of life. My disagreement with her is that she thinks non-violence can be accompanied by expressions of rage and aggression, while I want to argue that non-anger is also important.

3 ANGER'S POLITICAL USE

I shall begin with a provisional sketch of what I call the "politics of anger," and enrich the account as the section progresses. In highly simplified terms, "politics of anger" refers to the use of anger to achieve political goals. It is a neutral tool that can be deployed by any political movement. By definition, a politics of anger necessarily involves the expression of anger, which, as I have noted, is different from the feeling of anger. The difference is two-fold. On the one hand, the considerations for whether one should feel anger are not adequate for considering whether one should express anger. People who think that it is a moral failure not to feel anger under social injustice may hesitate when the question becomes whether one should express anger in a particular situation, given the potential danger and cost associated with it.[27] On the other hand, the expression of anger can be a performative act,[28] and does not necessarily involve the feeling of anger. China's former Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Zhao Lijian, frequently insulted other countries under the "wolf warrior diplomacy." Was he feeling angry each time? Not necessarily.

For any expression of anger to have a societal impact, it needs to have a sufficiently significant scale of influence. Someone might give an angry speech in a private setting, hoping to evoke a similar sentiment in her listeners. But that doesn't qualify as a politics of anger. Trump's Twitter posts, however, might be seen as fostering a politics of anger, given the population that he can reach and the level of social influence that his posts have.

But there's an immediate difficulty: who gets to define what is or is not an expression of anger? As Judith Butler rightly observes, a peaceful demonstration might be called "violent" by

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[27] See, for instance, Neu, *On Loving Our Enemies*, 13.
[28] For an account of this, see Sorial, "The Expression of Anger in the Public Sphere."

government authorities to justify potential interventions.[29] The same goes with anger: what is not intended as anger may be perceived as anger, and we do not always have control over how our expressions are received. But it would seem equally unreasonable for the matter to be left entirely to the individuals or parties, since they can always claim that they do not intend to express or incite anger. For this reason, I think we need to rely on some observable features in order to determine whether it is reasonable to think that an expression of anger fosters a politics of anger. Psychologists and philosophers have noted many common features of anger in interpersonal contexts. The assumption here – I think a safe one – is that what is characteristic about anger in interpersonal contexts is also characteristic about anger in wider social contexts. Thus, my account of the politics of anger is not only a summary of the features that we often observe about the political uses of anger, but also an attempt to apply what we know about anger in interpersonal contexts to the kind of anger that takes a collective and social form.

In what follows, I will attempt to detail this list of features. I should note from the outset that these features are not meant to constitute a list of necessary *and* sufficient conditions. For political actions or discourse to be seen as constituting a politics of anger, they need to have at least some of these features, although perhaps not all. And some of these features might be more salient in some instances, while others less so. These features, thus, only constitute a list of criteria that helps us to grasp the phenomenon of the politics of anger:

1)   *A specific framing of social problems that attributes blame to particular persons, institutions, or demographic groups*

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[29] Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 3.

As I have discussed in section 2, anger finds its root in moral injuries. For an injury to be "moral," it needs to be rooted in some sorts of moral wrong attributable to some forms of human agency. Social injustices are just this sort of moral wrong. It is therefore an important question as to who or what is responsible for the social injustice.

But that question is often contested. When the social injustice is the result of a specific public policy or the collective actions of a particular country, party, or social group, it is relatively easy to pinpoint which entity or group should be responsible. But often the causal relation in social history is more complicated: the social reality is usually the consequence of interactions between multifarious forces. There can be multiple ways to frame the social problem, and some ways of framing are less likely to provoke anger than others. For instance, research shows that people are less likely to be angry and more likely to be sad when they perceive the cause of negative events to be situational.[30] Anger often needs a target: that's why the politics of anger often entails a specific framing that attributes blame to certain persons, institutions, or demographic groups.

2)   A conceptual division between "us" and "them," or an in-group and an out-group

Allan Gibbard, in his account of moral emotions, notes the connection between anger and partiality: I will be outraged if my camel is stolen, but I probably won't be outraged if a stranger's camel far away is stolen.[31] The same might be said for indignation: I might be outraged when people close to me are hurt, but I might not have the same emotion if people who are distant suffer, at least not to the same degree. Indeed, if a person were to feel intense anger

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[30] Lerner and Tiedens, "Portrait of the Angry Decision Maker," 115–37.
[31] Gibbard, *Wise Choice, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment*, 126.

for all people around the globe who suffer from the social injustices reported in the news, we might wonder if she could still function normally in her daily life.

In this sense, Cherry is right in pointing out that anger is not incompatible with love.[32] Yet, all too often the kind of love that prompts anger is merely a partial one. Trump calls his angry supporters who participated in the Capitol attack "patriots," and in doing so, he justifies their actions in the name of love for the nation. This is not an uncommon strategy. In discussing the organization of hate, Sara Ahmed cites in her book the following the following passage from the Aryan Nation website:

> "The depths of Love are rooted and very deep in a real White Nationalist's soul and spirit…It is not hate that makes the average White man look upon a mixed racial couple with a scowl on his face and loathing in his heart. It is not hate that makes the White housewife throw down the daily newspaper in repulsion and anger after reading of yet another child-molester or rapist sentenced by corrupt courts to a couple short years in prison or on parole. It is not hate that makes the White workingman curse about the latest boatload of aliens dumped on our shores to be given job preference over the White citizens who built this land…No, it is not hate. It is Love."[33]

Here the white nationalist claims that what grounds their anger is not hatred but love – but the two emotions are really two sides of the same coin, insofar as their love is a partial love towards their own racial group. Their narratives focus on the perceived threats to their in-group, portrays the in-group as victims of the social injustice, and attributes blame to an out-group. The love and solidarity within the in-group thus become mutually reinforcing with the anger and antagonism towards the out-group. As a consequence, politics can become less about debates on political ideals or even policy details, but more about a matter of "us vs. them."

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[32] Cherry, *The Case for Rage*, 90–1.
[33] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 42.

3)   A solution to the social injustice that entails some retributive measures

The relationship between anger and retribution is an often-contested question. While Nussbaum argues that anger entails a desire to make the wrongdoer suffer,[34] many defenders of anger insist that at least some forms of anger do not necessarily involve a revenge impulse. I side with the defenders of anger on this matter, but given the scale of influence, the politics of anger often contributes to a social environment that breeds hostility and antagonism, and that social environment in turn grows the politics of anger in various forms. In any instance of the politics of anger, then, we often observe not *one* form of anger, but *many* forms of anger. Anger towards corporations that make profits at the cost of the environment may inspire nonviolent protests, but it may also lead to more radical actions, such as those adopted by the group Earth Liberation Front (ELF). Considering conventional ways to address eco-crisis, e.g., urging policy changes via legislative means, to be insufficient, they started sabotaging properties owned by corporations that gain profits from business operations that are damaging to the environment, such as ski resorts, power lines, and SUVs.

What is important here, then, is not that all forms of anger entail retributive impulses, but rather that *some* forms of anger do. For instance, Andrew Huddleston recently develops an account of "ressentiment" – drawing on Nietzsche's influential discussion of the term – to describe a distinctively vengeful and toxic type of anger. Importantly, Huddleston notes that ressentiment is not uncommon nowadays – we see it in violent actions in protests or verbal attacks on social media.[35] It is therefore not uncommon for a politics of anger to involve some pernicious kinds of anger that resort to retributive measures, including violence.

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[34] Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, 5.
[35] Huddleston, "Ressentiment," 671.

I hope that the above discussion provides a helpful sketch of what I mean by the "politics of anger." I shall briefly mention a paradigm case of the politics of anger to show how the list of criteria applies: Trumpism. While multiple factors contribute to the economic hardship that the American working class undergoes, Trump had been focusing on attributing blame to immigrants. In putting forward the motto "Make America Great Again," he created the divide between his allies – the "real Americans" – and his enemies. As I've discussed, he also encouraged violence: when asked to condemned white supremacists and military groups, he instead asked the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by." All of these strategies are characteristic of a politics of anger.

A full-fledged evaluation of the various instances of politics of anger is a complicated project, and it needs to take into consideration the particularities of different cases. In what follows, I shall merely take an initial step and point out an important reason why we may be wary of a politics of anger, which is that it obstructs the cultivation of empathy within a society. This will be my focus in the next section.

4   LIMITATIONS OF THE POLITICS OF ANGER

4.1   **The Importance of Empathizing with Each Other**

Let me begin by explaining the importance of empathy in politics. In our contemporary world, politics is often about contentions: it is about people with plural interests finding a common path to action. As Hannah Arendt remarks in her discussion of the public realm: "the reality of the public realm relies on simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which the no common denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects."[36]

In order to form a common action plan, then, it is important to work across different perspectives within such heterogenous societies. Otherwise, the public realm would collapse. Indeed, Arendt expresses worry about people becoming "entirely private" under conditions of mass society, which means that they become "deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them."[37] Her worry was echoed by Uma Narayan, who suggests that political coalitions can break down if people do not learn to trust and sustain working relationships with one another across divisive social differences and disagreement.[38]

The question is how we can effectively work across differences. In Iris Marion Young's criticism of the conventional deliberative model of democracy, she stresses that apart from critical arguments (which she criticizes as a speech style that implicitly favors male over female), other ways of articulating experiences and perspectives should also be valued.[39] Narayan more

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[36] Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57.
[37] Ibid., 58.
[38] Narayan, "Working Together Across Differences," 33–4.
[39] Young, "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy."

specifically points out the importance for non-members of an oppressed group (who she calls "outsiders") to try to understand the emotions of the members of an oppressed group (who she calls "insiders"). Without understanding those emotions, she thinks, it is highly difficult for people to communicate across differences.

If we take Narayan's idea seriously, then the insiders' expressions of emotions call for a distinct political virtue from the outsiders: empathy. In expressing their emotions, the insiders are not only articulating what they think of the issues (which they can do without the emotions), but also inviting others to understand how they *feel* about the issues. It is therefore not enough for outsiders to understand the insiders' viewpoint, but also important that they empathize with the insiders' emotions – indeed, many would suggest that it is through empathy that an outsider can have better knowledge of an insider's viewpoint.[40]

What complicates the picture is that there often are many different forms of injustice within a society. Of course, various forms of injustice can reinforce one another: for instance, women and people of color often work underpaid jobs, which means that the gender or racial injustice that they suffer from both leads to and is exacerbated by economic injustice. But sometimes the "oppressors" in one form of injustice may be the "oppressed" in another form of injustice. Rural white working-class, for instance, may be privileged in the racial structure, but may also be underprivileged in the economic structure. The senses of vulnerability that they articulate is no less real than the sense of vulnerability that other groups have – although they might be different. Yet, when we focus exclusively on our identity as "the oppressed" in one kind of injustice, we may easily forget our identity as "the oppressor" in another – we want

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[40] For defenses of the epistemic value of emotions and empathy, see, for instance, Lepoutre, "Rage Inside the Machine"; Meyers, "Victims' Stories and the Advancement of Human Rights."

ourselves to be empathized, but we are rarely aware that we should also extend empathy to others.

Hochschild helpfully uses the metaphor of an "empathy wall," which she describes as "an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who hold different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different grounds."[41] Note that she doesn't evoke the language of the "oppressed" and the "oppressors," but merely "different groups." We can thus propose a revision to Narayan's account: what is crucial in politics is perhaps not simply empathy from the oppressor to the oppressed, but rather, the capacity to feel empathy for people who are in a different sociopolitical position and who have articulated senses of social injuries.

4.2   **Empathy as Political Virtue**

In this section, I will say more about the specific kind of empathy that I think is constructive in politics and can function as a political virtue. Many philosophers are skeptical about empathy. Paul Bloom, for instance, warns us that empathy is parochial: it connects us only to particular individuals whom we are familiar with and care about.[42] He acknowledges that in some cases empathy can restrain anger, but he argues that as often it has the contrary effect of fostering anger: in Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for instance, Israeli reacted to the news of three murdered Israeli teenagers with attacks on Gaza, whereas Hamas drew on reports on murdered Palestinians to generate support for attacks against Israel.[43] This kind of empathy that Bloom has in mind is not different from the kind of partial love that I discussed in section 3. I have argued

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[41] Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, 5.
[42] See Bloom's article on *Boston Review*, "Against Empathy."
[43] Bloom, *Against Empathy*, 191–5.

how partial love can deepen the "us vs. them" divide and intensify inter-group conflicts, and for the same reason, Bloom suggests that we should be wary of empathy.

Some philosophers are concerned with a different sort of problem with empathy: they consider empathy to be highly demanding, or even impossible. Peter Goldie, for instance, makes the distinction between "empathy" (imagining how *others* feel in their situation) and "in-his-shoes imagination" (imagining how *I* feel in their situation).[44] The idea is that people differ in terms of personal history and character, etc., and hence even if I imagine myself to be in others' situations, how I view the situations might be different from how others view them. Empathy, Goldie suggests, not only requires one to understand the given situation enough to imagine oneself to be in the situation, but also requires one to bring to bear the characters of others so that one can imagine how *others* feel in the situation. As Diana Meyers notes in her critique of Goldie's theory, it is very difficult to fully transform oneself into others, even in imagination, and this makes Goldie's conception of empathy virtually impossible.[45]

A careful reader may have noticed that Bloom and Goldie are operating upon drastically different conceptions of empathy here, which leads to their different views about what empathy requires: Bloom's notion of empathy requires little to no imaginative effort, whereas Goldie's notion of empathy requires a high degree of imaginative effort. I shall point out, however, that neither of these two accounts is representative of the kind of empathy that I find politically constructive and valuable. For empathy to function as a political virtue, we need a notion of empathy that (1) gives us resources to overcome partiality; and (2) does not require feeling exactly what others feel (so it is not virtually impossible).

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[44] Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration*, 194–205.
[45] Meyers, *Victims' Stories and the Advancement of Human Rights*, 153.

I think Adam Smith provides a viable account of empathy for this purpose.[46] For Smith, empathy is imagining *ourselves* (not others) in others' situations, but to better do so, we need to be well-informed of others' situations. In this sense, Smith recognizes that empathy sometimes requires effort, and his account is thus different from Bloom's. Samuel Fleischacker helpfully labels Smithian empathy as "projective empathy," to distinguish it from the "contagious empathy" that is immediate and passive.[47] While Bloom's criticisms of empathy apply to contagious empathy, the Smithian projective empathy provides us with resources for overcoming partiality.

Fleischacker also challenges the distinction that Goldie makes about empathy and in-his-shoes imagination. He argues that properly entering others' situations *entails* becoming others and taking up others' perspective to some degree. A clear-cut distinction between *my* feeling and *others*' feeling in a situation presupposes that what constitutes a "situation" is merely its objective feature. Yet, Fleischacker suggests that this is not the case. To use his example: the effect of depriving a poor person of ten dollars is much more significant than depriving a rich person of the same amount of money.[48] While people may tend to think that the "situation" here is just losing ten dollars, it has to be understood in light of a broader context: a poor person might have starved for one day and this is the only money that he can use to get food. If we imagine only the single instance of losing the money without bearing in mind the broader context, then we cannot say that we have properly entered the situation. In correctly seeing what the situation *is* (i.e., viewing the single instance in light of other relevant aspects of that person's life), we

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[46] To be sure, Smith talks about "sympathy" instead of "empathy," but many commentators have noted that what he means by "sympathy" is what we now commonly refer to as "empathy," and therefore I will – following Smith's contemporary commentator Samuel Fleischacker – refer to his notion of sympathy as "empathy."

[47] Fleischacker, *Being Me Being You: Adam Smith and Empathy*, 4–13.

[48] Ibid., 35.

must also adopt others' perspectives and character to some extent. The stark contrast between *our* perspective and *others*' perspectives is not tenable if we enter the situation properly.

On the other hand, it is unnecessary for an empathetic person to fully transform herself into others within a Smithian framework. While it is important that we empathize with others in politics, we also want to leave room for making judgments and evaluations about others' views. Based on a Smithian theory of moral judgment, I approve of others' feelings or actions if I think I will feel or act the same when I imagine myself in their situation, and I disapprove of others if I think I won't feel or act in the same way. Merging with others completely, then, would make me lose the capacity to judge. This is a consequence that we want to avoid if empathy is to function as a political virtue: while it is important that we understand others' reasons and grounds for their political views, it is equally important that we maintain a certain distance so that we can critically evaluate those views.

We may think that a particularly empathetic person within a Smithian account would be able to see different perspectives when she empathizes with others: a perspective of what she thinks she would feel in the situation, and a perspective of what she thinks others would feel.[49] It is this kind of empathy that requires effort to enter others' perspectives while simultaneously retaining the flexibility to switch between perspectives that can function as a political virtue: it allows us to understand others' points of view (from their first-person perspectives) while retaining the capability to critically evaluate their behavior (from our third-person perspective).[50] Yet, this kind of empathy is often a scarce good within society. While this kind of empathy is more achievable than Goldie's conception of empathy, which requires one to feel exactly what

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[49] Meyers, without explicitly drawing upon inspirations from Smith, also proposes a similar account that stipulates that empathy requires constantly switching between the first-person perspective and the third-person perspective. See her *Victims' Stories*, 162.

[50] When I talk about "empathy" hereafter, I refer to specifically this kind of politically constructive empathy.

others feel, it is not as immediate or automatic as the contagious empathy that Bloom has in mind. Instead, it is a capacity that requires cultivation. And like all such capacities, it requires suitable social environments to thrive.

4.3   **How the Politics of Anger Hinders Empathy**

Now the question is: does a social environment characterized by a politics of anger undermine the cultivation of the capacity for empathy? Unsurprisingly, my answer is yes.

There are philosophical discussions that examine the relationship between empathy and anger on an individual level. Some emotions are less likely to elicit empathy from spectators than others. Adam Smith, for instance, observes that spectators more easily empathize with grief and joy from just the sight of the emotions (in Fleischacker's terms, this would be a form of contagious empathy), but it is more difficult for people to empathize with anger and resentment.[51] Smith's explanation is that expressions of anger suggest to spectators the idea that other people, whose interests are in conflict with those who express the anger, are involved. The spectators thus tend to keep a distance from or even feel an aversion to emotions like anger until they are informed of more details of the situation and come to understand the causes of the anger. One might add that it is particularly difficult to empathize with someone's anger when you are the target of the anger – instead, as I have discussed, anger is likely to incite anger among its target group.

Anger can also hinder one's own ability to empathize with others. Hirji outlines a type of anger that she calls "outrage anger," which she describes as "an attitude directed at the state of

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[51] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 11.

affairs in which a violation is not fully intelligible to the dominant moral community."[52] The object of this kind of anger is not a particular person but rather the system – a system that fails to acknowledge the wrong. Hirji uses the case of Chanel Miller, who was sexually assaulted by Brock Turner. She notes how the entire judicial and media environment favored Turner's account over Miller's, and how Miller's rage can only be properly understood in this broader context: while Miller wants Turner to be held accountable, her anger is more fundamentally directed toward the system, with the aim of building a world that takes the testimony of victims seriously.

On the one hand, Hirji makes it clear that Miller's anger is rightful, but on the other, she also cautions that anger closes off her empathy for the abuser, which can come with epistemic and prudential costs. She notes how Miller initially expresses her empathy for Turner, stating that "I didn't fight to end him; I fought to convert him to my side."[53] Yet, with the progression of the trial, overwhelmed by how her own testimony was not taken as seriously as Turner's, she develops the kind of "outrage anger" that Hirji describes. She no longer expresses empathy for Turner, and she becomes uninterested in helping Turner understand his wrong and having him reform. Hirji acknowledges the important psychological role that such anger plays in protecting the victims, but she also carefully points out that it can be epistemically obscuring in certain cases and is not constructive in having the perpetrators of injustice change.

Defenders of anger may say that not all forms of anger preclude the kind of empathy that functions as a political virtue – I agree, but I also think that this defense applies only to anger as an individual subjective experience. I will argue that the politics of anger is necessarily hostile to the cultivation of the politically constructive empathy societal-wide. I will discuss three ways in

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[52] Hirji, "Outrage and the Bounds of Empathy," 1.
[53] Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir*, 91.

which this is the case, each corresponding to a common feature of the politics of anger that I discussed in section 3:

1)   The attribution of blame and empathy

As I've discussed, a politics of anger often involves attributing blame to certain persons, institutions, or demographic groups, and in doing so, we are making the moral judgment that they are wrong. It is true that the constructive kind of empathy that I propose allows people to switch between perspectives, which means that one can empathize with others (when one adopts a first-person perspective of the other) and yet make moral judgments (when one adopts a third-person perspective of oneself), but such a kind of empathy may affect the moral judgments that we end up making. The relationship between moral judgment and empathy, after all, is complicated. Based on a Smithian account, empathy is the mechanism through which we make moral judgments: whether you judge something to be proper is based on whether you fully empathize with the person. But we must note that judgments also affect empathy: Nancy Sherman, for instance, highlights the importance of non-judgmental empathy in psycho-therapeutic settings, as being morally judgmental obstructs a therapist's capacity to empathize with the patient.[54]

I want to suggest that constantly switching between perspectives may allow us to eventually arrive at a more sophisticated moral judgment. We may begin to see that our injury is often the consequence of complicated history and social interactions. We may realize that the oppressors might be the oppressed in other kinds of injustices or victims of certain social history. This does not mean that we cannot hold the oppressors responsible. But it has implications for

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[54] Sherman, "Empathy and Imagination," 91–3.

our emotional attitudes to them. I have mentioned in the previous section that people are less likely to be angry and more likely to be sad when they perceive the cause to be situational.[55] Empathy, therefore, doesn't fit well with a politics of anger that attributes blame solely to certain individuals or groups. The insistence of an oversimplified view of the situation – even when it has some elements of truth – can blind us from the more complicated picture and does not foster empathy.

2)   The "us vs. them" division and empathy

In *Identity\Difference*, Connolly tells the story of Las Casas, a 16th-century Spanish Christian priest. In order to better convert the Aztecs, Las Casas was dedicated to learning about their culture. During the process, however, Las Casas realized that the Aztecs – commonly denounced by Europeans at that time as barbaric – were actually not that different from the Europeans. He began to see their shared humanity and tried to communicate that to other Christians. However, this led to the silencing of his voice in Spain. Connolly succinctly remarks how this case shows that identity is only maintained through differences:

> "…when one remains within the established field of identity and difference, one readily becomes a bearer of strategies to protect identity through devaluation of others; but if one transcends the domestic field of identities through which the other is constituted, one loses the identity and standing needed to communicate with those one sought to inform."[56]

A politics of anger built upon the conceptual division of "us" and "them" is therefore hostile to empathy. Empathetic observations of "them" may show that the "us vs. them" distinction is untenable, after all. To maintain the distinction, the empathetic remarks of the outgroup are often left unheard in the ingroup.

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[55] Lerner and Tiedens, "Portrait of the Angry Decision Maker," 116.
[56] Connolly, *Identity\Difference*, 44.

3)   Violence and empathy

The point that violence threatens empathy, I think, is relatively uncontroversial. To be sure, there are different types of violence, and I do not want to argue that all forms of violence are all-things-considered impermissible, nor do I attempt to provide an account that specify what forms of violence are justifiable under which circumstance. I merely want to point out some underlying assumptions when people advocate for the use of violence in political movements and show how they are incompatible with empathy.

A common justification for allowing the use of violence is self-defense, especially during confrontations with political opponents. I would agree that self-defense during confrontations might be one of the cases where the need for self-preservation triumphs the need to solicit empathy, provided that the degree of counterviolence is appropriate. But sometimes activists justify initiating violence as a response to what is called structural or systemic violence. In this view, any violence is a counterviolence. Antifa, a decentralized left-wing antifascist group in the U.S., for instance, justifies their militant tactics – smashing shop windows, setting fire on the streets, punching people in the face – as "collective self-defense."[57] However, as Butler points out, the important question here is what we take to be the "self": in justifying violence in terms of self-defense, we are drawing boundaries between "self" and "others"; we are distinguishing people who are worth defending from those who are not.[58] Theorists like David Livingstone Smith further argue that the boundary here may be a boundary between who we take to be humans and who we do not.[59] In dehumanizing others, we no longer see them as fellow members of human society who are worthy of dignity and respect. For Smith, this explains why slave

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[57] Bray, *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, 15.
[58] Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence*, 11.
[59] See Smith, *Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others*.

trades and brutal colonialization took place, ironically, during the Enlightenment period when human dignity was championed.

Fleishacker points out that such dehumanization, or even in some cases demonization, is fundamentally incongruent with empathy, as empathy is essentially an appreciation of the shared humanity, or an acknowledgement that "I could have been him, and he could have been me."[60] While violence requires us to draw the boundary between "self" and "others," empathy requires us to diminish the boundary between "self" and "others" at least in some sense. When we empathize with others, we imagine ourselves to be in others' positions, and one may think that imagining the injury that the victims would suffer can prompt people to reconsider their violent tactics. Simon Baron-Cohen, for instance, suggests that if the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could imagine himself to be the father of a Palestinian child, then perhaps he would not command the bombing that risks killing innocent Palestine kids.[61]

If a politics of anger is necessarily detrimental to the cultivation of empathy societal-wide, then this is a serious limitation: anger calls for empathetic listeners, but a politics of anger creates obstacles for building a social environment that is conducive to the cultivation of empathy. If our goal is to address social injustices by working across differences, then appealing to a politics of anger may not be the best strategy available to us.

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[60] Ibid., 161.
[61] Baron-Cohen, "Making Space for Empathy."

5   CONCLUSION

I should emphasize again that my critique does not entail an all-things-considered rejection of the politics of anger. There might be circumstances that are intolerable to the extent that working across differences becomes impossible, and the considerations for cultivating empathy need to be overridden. I also by no means suggest that the limitations of the politics of anger imply that all political deliberations are best conducted in a cool and calm argumentative style. It is important, I think, to acknowledge the role of emotions in public discussions. However, which emotions should be appealed to is an important question. I want to suggest that the kind of emotion that Mike Schaff wishes to suppress in his public speech – grief – may be a better candidate compared with anger: like anger, it registers an appreciation of social injustice; unlike anger, its expression is not detrimental to cultivating the capacity of empathy societal-wide.

Social movements motivated by grief are not uncommon. "Women in Black," for instance, is an anti-war movement first formed by Israeli women in Jerusalem in 1988 following the First Intifada, and the movement encourages the expression of grief. Participants gathered in public spaces every Friday afternoon before the Sabbath to hold vigils for all victims of the conflict. One of the participants, Daphna, explains that the black clothing symbolizes sadness and mourning, and importantly, this is a mourning for both sides, since the other side has also lost.[62]

To be sure, grief and anger sometimes go together. Grief over Israel's loss may evoke anger against the Palestinians. Indeed, the Women in Black movement was met by outrageous counterdemonstrators: they called the participants in the Women in Black movement "traitors,"

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[62] Gabriel, "Grief and Rage: Collective Emotions in the Politics of Peace and the Politics of Gender in Israel," 321.

and they assaulted the participants verbally and physically.[63] But this again marks the differences between the expression of grief and the expression of anger: the expression of anger often reinforces boundaries, the expression of grief – when it is devoid of anger, as in the Women in Black movement – has the potential of bringing different sides together.

While this paper does not provide an all-things-considered rejection of the use of anger in politics, I do want to suggest that we should carefully consider what anger can and cannot do in each context, and when alternatives are available, whether we should turn to other means of communication that may better foster empathy and understanding. That way, we may avoid talking past each other.

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[63] Ibid., 326.

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