

Postmodern *Ressentiment*, or the Virtue of “Voluntary Inservitude”

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Ressentiment, after Friedrich Nietzsche, names the generative feeling of the powerless sparking revolt against the nobles and the institution of a new, slave morality. Fueled by *ressentiment*, the slaves managed to convert their political powerlessness into evaluative power, imposing and naturalizing a new moral regime, which, as Nietzsche details, they grounded in negation rather than affirmation, in reaction rather than action. In their rebellion against the nobles, the slaves first transformed the “good” of the master into “evil,” and only then claimed their own behavior as good. Being good is not something that the slaves affirm but rather infer from their primordial act of negation. In other words, the hermeneutic denunciation of the powerful precedes and legitimizes the self-affirmation of the weak. Gilles Deleuze captures well this logic of *ressentiment*: “You are evil therefore I am good.”¹ *Ressentiment* has become the affect par excellence of the wretched of the earth, an essential ingredient in their ascendancy to victimhood. Postmodern *ressentiment* appears to reflect the dynamics of this affect in the contemporary age of identity politics. The champions of identity politics are today's inheritors of *ressentiment*, tapping its alchemical force in their pursuit of recognition and inclusion. Slavoj Žižek disparagingly associates the cult of victimhood with

postmodernity: "Postmodern identity politics involves the logic of *ressentiment*, of proclaiming oneself a victim and expecting the dominant social Other to pay for the damage."²

Critics have also documented the persistence and pervasiveness of this form of *ressentiment* in a variety of political movements, from the cultural Left to the populist Right, with the latter learning its lessons from the former. Wendy Brown and Robert Pfaller, for example, take up the limits of *ressentiment* for articulating and enacting a genuinely emancipatory politics. They both see *ressentiment* as failing to alter the capitalist system at hand. Noting that "the late modern liberal subject quite literally seethes with *ressentiment*," Brown laments *ressentiment's* hold on the Left's cultural imaginary.³ Harnessing *ressentiment's* force only gives the semblance of opposition, "parad[ing] as radical critique."⁴ Her rejoinder to *ressentiment* is a reinvigorated democratic activism that shifts from a fetishized, and depoliticized, personal "I am" to a politicized, collective "I want this for us."⁵ Robert Pfaller, for his part, considers *ressentiment* a sort of ideology, denoting a "specific subject-formation"⁶ produced under a set of historical conditions. Echoing Žižek, today's *ressentiment*, Pfaller argues, corresponds to the historical epoch of postmodernity, "a heyday of resentment,"⁷ where the Left takes a cultural turn, unable to distinguish itself at the economic level, bracketing any engagement with class struggle.⁸

From this vantage point, the subject of *ressentiment* corresponds to the postmodern subject. The cultural Left has tacitly accepted the unchanging reality of the capitalist regime. Its sanctioned model of identity narratives gives validation to marginalized groups; identity politics thus both expresses and fuels their *ressentiment*. Their suffering, in turn, comes to index the worthiness of their plight. But, for Brown and Pfaller, this mobilization of *ressentiment* comes at a political cost: the privatization of wrongs forecloses the possibility of a genuine collective intervention. On this account, there is no daylight between postmodern *ressentiment* and the relativism of postmodern identity politics. The former, strictly speaking, eschews politics, *because* its subjects—who are overinvested in their own woundedness—are unable or unwilling to collectivize their plight and move beyond their narrow self-interest. This version of postmodern *ressentiment*, however, gives too much weight to the pull of identity politics and ignores a counter-tradition that envisages the postmodern as a revival of, if not a doubling down on, the virtues of critique and the Enlightenment. I am, of course, thinking here of Michel Foucault's critical dialogue with Immanuel Kant and the Enlightenment.

In "What is Enlightenment?" Foucault describes the labor of critique as "work on our limits, that is, a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty."⁹ This type of critique "will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we

are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think."¹⁰ Similarly, in his earlier "What is Critique?" Foucault defines critique as "the art of voluntary inservitude [*l'art de l'inservitude volontaire*]," as a "reflective indocility [*l'indocilité réfléchie*]," which seeks "desubjectification" in "the politics of truth."¹¹ In the practice of *voluntary inservitude*, the subject resists her normalization, her subject-formation or *assujettissement*, engaging, so to speak, in the active unmaking and remaking of subjectivity.

In what follows, I argue that Foucauldian desubjectification serves as a generative counter to identity politics, to the fetishized attachment to one's wound, recasting postmodern *ressentiment* in a way that avoids some of the pitfalls highlighted by Brown and Pfaller. What is a subject of *ressentiment* who divests from the ideological bank of identitarianism? What is this subject whose negativity is not put in the service of a life-denying hermeneutics and a depoliticized politics? Postmodern *ressentiment*, in its Foucauldian guise, becomes indistinguishable and inseparable from the critical attitude, this "philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era."¹² To be sure, this version of postmodern *ressentiment* remains reactive—critique's *No!* is invariably reacting to a pre-existing given—but its reactivity must be kept separate from the reactivity forged and performed under the horizon of identity politics, which works to buttress the identity of the wronged. It moves centrifugally, uncompromising in its inservitude, weakening the psychic hold of identity.¹³ In articulating this Foucauldian desubjectification of *ressentiment*, I will first turn to Kant's key, though not unproblematic, distinction between the private and public use of reason. Then, I will examine Foucault's postmodern contestation of the opposition—along with his correlate dissatisfaction with Kant's observation, "*Argue*, as much as you want and about what you want, *but obey!*"¹⁴—setting up the possibility for what I call the "public use of *ressentiment*," a view of *ressentiment* that blunts the pull to identity (politics), that declines its interpellative rewards and thwarts the temptation of particularism, recasting *ressentiment's* negativity counter-intuitively (at least from a Foucauldian stance) in universalist terms.

If the private use of *ressentiment*, in the hands of identity politics, makes grievance primarily a local affair, providing its subjects with a narrative of their oppression that simultaneously fixes their enemy's being and provides the necessary self-satisfaction that comes with identity, the public use of *ressentiment*, from a Foucauldian vantage point, explodes the contours of the situation, insisting on the virtue of negativity. If critique is the ethos of modernity, *ressentiment*, I argue, is that of the faceless wretched. The public use of *ressentiment*, or *ressentiment* with critique, articulates the ethos of (post)modernity's excluded and marginalized figures:

the disposable subjects of the present. The grievances of the wretched cannot be met with a personalized—and thus depoliticized—symbolic upgrade (the putative goal of identity politics). The wretched of the earth refuse to be interpellated as victims, beings whose “recognition” by the dominant social Other is framed as the ultimate solution to their social death and agony. What they are after is not inclusion into liberal democracy, but the abolition of its operations and norms. The public use of *ressentiment* yearns for another grammar of suffering and redress. Unlike those espoused by the private use of *ressentiment*, its demands cannot be addressed by a politics of particularism. Its orientation is rather universalist. Now, I will trace this universality from Kant's public use of reason to the Foucauldian-inspired public use of *ressentiment*, and take up the challenge of thinking postmodern *ressentiment* against the grain, against Foucault's own phobia and abandonment of the universal.¹⁵

Kant and Enlightenment's Reason

Kant introduces his distinction between the private and public uses of reason in his 1784 essay “What Is Enlightenment?”¹⁶ In the domain of the “private use of reason,” individuals acting in an official capacity have to follow orders. Not obeying is not an option. But Kant also underscores that these same individuals are irreducible to their professional obedience. If the private use of reason were all there is, then Enlightenment as such—the overcoming of self-imposed immaturity, the desire and audacity to know—would be a mere fantasy and ideology. In performing the “private use of reason,” a military officer, for example, respects the chain of command, and yet it is crucial that this same officer not censure himself and surrender the right to exercise his public use of reason, which entails speaking as “*a scholar*... before the entire public of the *reading world*.”¹⁷ Žižek elevates the use of public reason in his reading of Kant, pursuing the implications of this Enlightenment supplement by pointing to its universal aspect and prospect—those very elements that Foucault prefers to foreclose in his own appropriation of the Kantian legacy. But as we shall see, the universal that Žižek privileges and promotes is not the same ideological universalism bemoaned by Foucault and other postmodern thinkers. It is a negative universality that is fundamentally at odds with dominant accounts of the universal: abstract universals premised on an a priori category (anchored in nature, humanism, reason, etc.) which is subsequently applied to all circumstances. The signifier “man,” for example, functions as an abstract universal by obfuscating its positionality, its enunciation from a particular position, and thus is made to stand for unmarked White, European, heterosexual, able-bodied men.

Rejecting abstract universalism, however, does not have to lead to an embrace of difference (the way of postmodern philosophy). Declining the lure of particularism (the putative alternative to universalism, the stuff of identity politics), Žižek turns instead to the public use of reason for its emancipatory potential. The public use of reason, he writes, “in a kind of short-circuit, by-passing the mediation of the particular, directly participates in the universal.”¹⁸ This use of reason foregrounds the subject’s lack of self-identity, its antagonistic core; it introduces a gap between the self and her social environment, enabling an individual to unplug from her organic community. Without the public use of reason, the individual would be subservient to the processes of normalization, ensconced in her daily habits, condemned to the “communal-institutional order of one’s particular identification.”¹⁹

Žižek champions the cosmopolitanism afforded by the public use of reason. Unlike the private use of reason, which locks the subject in her particularity or ethnic roots, the public use of reason unlocks her and fosters planetary connectivity. The former always risks reifying her in a state of immaturity whereas the latter exposes the subject to “the public space of the ‘world civil society,’”²⁰ to thinking as such, to the Enlightenment and the cognitive benefits of dialoguing with a community of scholars. Žižek ingeniously connects Kant’s public use of reason to Paul’s utterance from *Galatians* 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”²¹ As with the example of Christ, the public use of reason is transformative, event-making; it registers an excess insofar as it casts identity or subjectivity as incomplete, incommensurable with being. The public use of reason allows the subject to adopt a perspective of herself from the standpoint of universality: a being subtracted from and at odds with the existing social order of things. If the private use of reason reflects and underpins an ethnocentric ethos, the public use of reason induces a cosmopolitan sensibility, positioning the individual as a universal subject. And yet let’s not forget that Kant qualifies the transgressive force of the public use of reason by insisting on the need for political obedience. So how politically emancipatory is this public use of reason?

Cognizant of the optics—of what Foucault has disparagingly called “the contract of rational despotism with free reason”²²—Žižek proposes to recast the consequences of Kant’s “Think freely, but obey.” Against the anarchist wing of the cultural Left, which is indebted to Foucault’s anti-statist attitude, Žižek has tried, most recently in the context of Covid-19, to revive an investment in the state, arguing that “a strong state is needed in times of epidemics since large-scale measures like quarantines have to be performed with military discipline.”²³ For Žižek, the state is not a priori evil, an agent of surveillance and control. He envisages a state that takes the form of “disaster Communism,” capitalizing on the immense global challenges facing

us (“epidemics will return, combined with other ecological threats, from droughts to locusts, so hard decisions are to be made now”) to reconfigure a socio-political agenda decoupled from “market mechanisms.”²⁴ “Think freely, but obey” even appears as the proper antidote to the rise of the anti-vaxxers. In Kantian fashion, Žižek pleads for a generative form of skepticism: “vaccine doubters” are free to “debate, [and] publish [their] doubts,” but they must also “obey regulations once the public authority imposes them.” The stakes are high. “Without such practical consensus,” Žižek fears, “we will slowly drift into a society composed of tribal factions, as it is happening in many Western countries.”²⁵ Unrestrained doubt puts at risk the “ethical substance within each culture,” creating, in turn, the dreadful conditions for a “new barbarism.”²⁶ A leftist anti-statist ethos does nothing to combat the populist dissatisfaction emerging from the Right. Worse, the anarchist Left and populist Right collude and jeopardize further our shared social fabric. As with identity politics, “tribal factions” are the new reality, the new normal of the postpolitical.

A return to the state is coterminous with a reclaiming of the commons. The public use of reason plays a crucial role in advancing the well-being of the whole, the universal welfare of its people. Still, the Kantian dictum “Think freely, but obey” is not without its shortcomings. Regardless of Žižek’s inventive deployment of the Kantian concept, the injunction to obey sits awkwardly with the public use of reason. Critical reasoning appears to cede the way to political obedience. The former’s negativity (reason in the mode of critique) is muzzled by the latter’s stringency (reason subordinated to the political good of the polity). The injunction to obey risks betraying Kant’s enlightenment, nullifying “an ethical demand at the heart of the critical subject.”²⁷ Not only does too much obedience (reason in its private form) lock the subject in a permanent state of immaturity, more importantly, for Foucault, who underscores the potential ideological traps of Kant’s public use of reason, the division might serve power rather than contest it:

We must reject the division of labor so often proposed to us: individuals can get indignant and talk; governments will reflect and act. It’s true that good governments appreciate the holy indignation of the governed, providing it remains lyrical. I think we need to be aware that very often it is those who govern who talk, are capable only of talking, and want only to talk. Experience shows that one can and must refuse the theatrical role of pure indignation that is proposed to us.²⁸

Translating indignation into politics is the challenge. Western states readily tolerate or even encourage indignation (in a display of liberalism, of “acceptance” of dissent),

but only on the condition that “it remains lyrical,” especially non-violent, and removed from any material actions.

So, on one hand, calls for reasoned obedience might be welcomed in the context of anti-vaxxers or Capitol Insurrectionists, but, on the other, this approach to obedience discloses its limits when the unruly voices refuse to be merely “lyrical,” and are driven by a just and universal cause, a cause driven by a *ressentiment* position that by-passes the psychic/economic bribes of identity. In the contemporary scene, we might consider the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), which mobilized Black anger felt at police brutality and systemic anti-Blackness and translated it into a global public phenomenon. If Kant’s public use of reason opens to cosmopolitanism, to a “trans-national public space,”²⁹ BLM’s public use of *ressentiment* registers the ethical bankruptcy of White civil society and the juridical apparatus of the state: how do you redeem a symbolic order that is hell bent on your submission or destruction? The motto for Black activists, and other racialized or marginalized groups, is decidedly not “Think freely, but obey” but “Rage freely, *and disobey*,” do not compromise on your *ressentiment*.

Disobedience and *Ressentiment*

Not all acts of disobedience are alike, however. BLM’s political disobedience—which illustrates and enacts a collective “voluntary inservitude”—is not a “continuous expansion” of Nietzschean *ressentiment* but “a radical dislocation” of it.³⁰ The public use of *ressentiment* repeats the *ressentiment* of the slavish herd *and dislocates* it. BLM’s *ressentiment* is “torn out from its context and placed into a new context in which it is subordinated to a space regulated by a different logic.”³¹ An anti-racist/anti-colonial logic now regulates the concept. And through this dislocation, subjected to a dialectical transformation, *ressentiment* undergoes a substantial change. This subject of *ressentiment* actively divests from the existing social edifice, distancing herself from what, in principle, supports and sustains her symbolic identity. In exercising her public use of *ressentiment*, the subject is no longer looking for recognition and accommodation; she deems reform limited or pointless, or even worse, a cruel promise that will never be met. But if the ideological slogan “it gets better”—whose principal aim is to pacify rage, defang *ressentiment*—oppresses further the wretched with hope that never materializes, moving beyond it proves particularly difficult. The private use of *ressentiment* invariably locks the subject in her pain, making her suffering constitutive of her identity. Identity politics, which deploys

the private use of *ressentiment* with cunningness, offers a compromised vision to its subjects: you may not ever belong to the ruling class, but we'll guarantee that you maximize your (group's) interests. There is an undeniable yes behind identity politics. And this yes, as Kennan Ferguson points out, "implicitly legitimizes the contemporary world. Aiming for yes means compromising in advance. It is to allow that to get somewhere, you must start where you are. Yes is agreeable; yes is conciliatory; yes is complicit."³² In short, "yes is a modality of power."³³ And power thrives in the realm of the possible. Yes's temporality is a futurology, which, as Žižek defines it, is "a systematic forecasting of the future from the present trends in society. And therein resides the problem—futuresology mostly extrapolates what will come from the present tendencies."³⁴ Identity politics does nothing to counter this trend. On the contrary, it forecloses politics—the confrontation of society's antagonisms—in favor of a predictable (= postpolitical) future, a terrain where only the struggles for respect and recognition, and against normalization and control, are authorized or given legitimacy.

Since disposability and exclusion characterize the life of the wretched, identity politics is often the recourse of choice for many disempowered groups. The cultural Left courts society's destitute and capitalizes on their *ressentiment*, purporting to speak the "truths" of their condition.³⁵ The leaders of identity politics assume a position of authority, imposing a "mode of subjectivation," *mode d'assujettissement*, which "invit[es] or incit[es]" society's wronged and neglected "to recognize their moral obligations,"³⁶ to dutifully turn their wound into a *substance*, the basis for a moral cause. With its investment in the regime of rights, identity politics can be said to generate and sustain its own power/knowledge configuration, its own form of governmentality, yoking power, truth, and the subject together. The leaders of identity politics feature as the new priests, in the Nietzschean sense of the term; they succeed in keeping the wretched cloistered in their *ressentiment*, foreclosing its opening to its public use. The new priests of identity politics engage in *ressentiment* management; they determine the conduct of their alienated constituents (would-be victims), helping to guide their actions and modes of thought; they discipline their subjects to hate, to blame, that is, to resent *in a particular way*. At one level, identity politics can be seen as deploying what Foucault calls "technologies of the self," which refer to "techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power."³⁷ In becoming a victim, an individual governs and transforms herself into a particular subject of *ressentiment*.

Unlike “technologies of domination,” which Foucault identifies with mechanisms of normalization and modes of subjectivization, “technologies of the self” foregrounds the role of the subject in her own making. Foucault acknowledged that his overemphasis on technologies of power and domination led to a neglect of the subject. He sought to supplement his earlier account by returning to the “origins” of modernity, to the study of Greco-Roman culture, and focusing, in particular, on the ancient, ethical notion of the “care of the self” (*le souci de soi*). In a late interview, Foucault drew attention to the aesthetic dimension of self-formation: “From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.”³⁸ Indeed, the care of the self involves first and foremost an art of life, a stylized relationship to oneself, a “relation of the self to itself” (*rapport à soi*). With this notion of self-care, Foucault avoided both the reduction of the subject to a *mere* discursive effect and the ideological lure of a romantic return to a substantial account of the subject. Foucault’s subject is bound by socio-historical conditions, from which that subject derives limited technologies of the self with which to fashion itself. The call of critique is thus never without location; it emerges not from a transcendental intervention—as with the “universal intellectual”³⁹—but through the limitations of these technologies. Clarifying further the nature of the agency underpinning the act of self-making, Foucault states: “I would say that if now I am interested . . . in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. *They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group.*”⁴⁰ The freedom of the self here is always already situated, taking place within rather than prior or beyond networks or fields of power.

By examining how marginalized groups are taught—by activists, local leaders, politicians, etc.) to voice their frustration and anger, to relate to themselves, to modify themselves, to understand their pain and exclusion, we may get a better idea of the ways individuals are constituted as subjects of *ressentiment* via identity politics. Individuals constitute themselves as victims in an active fashion, but the practices that they engage in, more often than not, bear the mark of power and control rather than liberation and justice. By reifying limits rather than working on them, identity politics reinforces power, abandoning one form of normalization for another. It thus invariably reproduces the system it claims to disrupt or leave behind. For this reason, identity politics, and the “rhetoric and politics of blame”⁴¹ that it solicits, is anathema to actual emancipation, to the labor of desubjectification; it ontologizes the victim’s positionality, limiting possibilities, collapsing becoming into being, doing into doer, narrowing what the wretched can do or think.

In contrast, the *No!* of the public use of *ressentiment* cuts much deeper; it yearns for the impossible; indeed, we might say the Foucauldian injunction to “think differently” (*penser autrement*) characterizes its critical orientation.⁴² Critique and *ressentiment* are co-constitutive. In thinking emancipation differently, the overcoming of “self-imposed immaturity” would mean avoiding a kind of *ressentiment* that can, in principle, be placated by the rhetoric and promises of identity politics. Here, *ressentiment* with critique (and vice versa) is a way of contesting otherwise; it indexes a refusal to conform to the politics of respectability and its sanctioned venues of resistance. Take for example Jack Halberstam’s trenchant intervention concerning the struggle for trans rights in prison:

The pursuit of trans* worlds means shattering the realities within which those trans* bodies require recognition, rights, and accommodations. As trans* activists say about prison, it is not about finding space in the prison that is appropriate for trans bodies; we should instead be using the occasion of the crisis initiated by the trans* body to question the practice of caging humans in the first place. In other words, there is no right cage.⁴³

A public use of *ressentiment* is implicitly at work here. It is a *ressentiment* that fuels the critique of incarceration; it is a *ressentiment* that is not exhausted by recognition (of the plight of trans bodies) but that, on the contrary, sees in recognition the tools of containment and manipulation. *Ressentiment*, in its public form, wants more, and demands more; the virtue of critique lies in its uncompromising desires; it stubbornly refuses to be interpellated into the operations and norms of liberal democracy (an interpellation facilitated rather than hampered by identity politics).

This form of *ressentiment* doesn’t ask for more rights, nor is it envious of the status quo. Quite the contrary, it dreams of abolition and revolution. In Halberstam’s example, trans* activists are not looking for equal (mis)treatment—they want to put an end to the practice of incarceration itself. Likewise, postmodern *ressentiment* is not invested in the sanctity of identity but in its ideological undoing and perpetual remaking. That is to say, the public use of *ressentiment* contests the legitimacy of what *is* as it opens a space for new subjectivities.

Speaking Truth to Power

Resistance to power begins with the demand to “refuse what we are.”⁴⁴ But far from advocating a state of pure anarchy, a refusal to being governed at all, Foucauldian critique represents “the art of not being governed like that.”⁴⁵ Critique is best

understood as a precondition for political transformation; it involves “the work of the self on the self” (*le travail de soi sur soi*); an intellectual work that is unfinalizable, a work that remains imperfect (in the etymological sense of incomplete). Foucault challenges the principle of identity even further, calling for a disengagement from oneself, “to get free from oneself” (*se dépendre de soi-même*), as he puts it. Thinking Foucault with Badiou, we might say that the virtue of critique lies in becoming indifferent to one’s own difference.⁴⁶ The perpetual desire to break free of oneself, of one’s will to servitude, defines for Foucault “the ethic of the intellectual.”⁴⁷

Needless to say, the work of *refusing what we are* also has political ramifications, especially when it takes the form of *parrhēsia* (frankness, truth-telling). Foucault distinguishes *parrhēsia* from rhetoric. “Whereas rhetoric provides the speaker with technical devices to help him prevail upon the minds of his audience...., in *parrhesia*,” Foucault argues, “the *parrhesiastes* acts on other people’s minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes.”⁴⁸ Rhetoric gives primacy to the manner of persuasion, while *parrhēsia* is invested in speaking the truth. Indeed, philosophical frankness means *speaking truth to power* or it means nothing at all. But is *parrhēsia* compatible with *ressentiment*? Does the latter’s tumultuous affective logic make it foreign to the former? Again, it depends on which form of *ressentiment* is mobilized. In considering the (non)relation between the two concepts, I want to turn to Holocaust survivor and torture victim Jean Améry, and examine the politics of truth that his (transvalued) *ressentiment* generates and later betrays.

Writing at a time when Germany was championing a national healing narrative, Améry voiced his objection to the social pressure to forgive and forget in the name of communal harmony. He refused *to be governed like that*, to be bound to a social framework at odds with his core beliefs. Améry’s *ressentiment* spurred his discontent with the dominant social script, enabling him to psychologically resist Germany’s yes, effectively disclosing the sham of Germany’s phantasmatic self-image. Germany’s yes is premised on the ideological circulation and reproduction of “common sense”: that Germany’s Nazism belonged squarely to its regretful past. Améry says *No!* His *ressentiment* functions as a kind of killjoy; the subject who bears it holds on to their “moral truth.”⁴⁹ In refusing to play along, Améry practices *parrhēsia*, speaking truth to the big Other. He refuses to endorse Germany’s post-war narrative. His *ressentiment* generates a counter truth. Améry as parrhēsiast “gives his opinion, he says what he thinks, he personally signs, as it were, the truth he states, he binds himself to this truth, and he is consequently bound to it and by it.”⁵⁰ He puts on full display what we’ve been calling the public use of *ressentiment*. Filled by *ressentiment*, Améry condemns the German state and its whitewashing of the past: “I

rebel: against my past, against history, and against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way. Nothing has healed, and what perhaps was already on the point of healing in 1964 is bursting open again as an infected wound."⁵¹ Obedience is tantamount to capitulation. "Rage freely, *and disobey*" aptly translates the negativity of Améry's *ressentiment*.

This is something that Žižek himself praised about Améry—despite its apparent corrosiveness to the ethical substance of post-war German culture. According to Žižek, Améry's authentic or life-affirming *ressentiment* stands for "a refusal to 'normalise' the crime, to make it part of the ordinary/explicable/accountable flow of things, to integrate it into a consistent and meaningful life-narrative; after all possible explanations, it returns with its question: 'Yes, I got all this, but nevertheless, *how could you have done it?* Your story about it doesn't make sense!'"⁵² Améry's *ressentiment*, the affect of a wronged subject, did not coalesce around a rigid and prescribed identity. The force of his *ressentiment* lies elsewhere, in its undoing Germany's gentrified self-identity (the product of cheap and lazy forgiveness). Améry points to another *ressentiment*, one that is otherwise than slavish, to a *ressentiment* that breaks free from the rancorous politics of blame, which always risks locking the subject-cum-victim in her suffering.

Améry's defiant *ressentiment* has inspired other marginalized groups in their politics of resistance. In *Red Skin, White Masks*, which critically adopts a Fanonian framework for analyzing Indigenous refusal of Canada's liberal politics of recognition, Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard gestures to Améry's appropriation of *ressentiment* while proposing to substitute "resentment" for *ressentiment*:

"I contend that what gets implicitly represented by the state as a form of Indigenous *ressentiment*—namely, Indigenous peoples' seemingly pathological inability to get over harms inflicted in the past—is actually a manifestation of our *righteous resentment*: that is, our bitter indignation and persistent anger at being treated unjustly by a colonial state both historically and in the present."⁵³

Though I think that Coulthard moves too quickly from *ressentiment* to resentment, failing to attest to *ressentiment's* dynamics and bypasses the ways to harness its negative energies, he does correctly underscore the affect's generative force, identifying it as a form of "*politicized anger*."⁵⁴ Indigenous *ressentiment* looks different from the vantage point of its public form. Against the settler's attempt to pathologize the Native (which is an instance of distorting/blaming the victim), the public use of

ressentiment fosters an anger that refuses society's ruse/rewards of inclusion. It insists on an antagonism that no settler state can address without simultaneously putting its system of privilege under immense scrutiny—there is no justice without decolonization. A *politicized anger* holds the possibility of altering the “present field of possible experiences,”⁵⁵ serving as a moment of “transfiguration.”⁵⁶

Ressentiment here is through and through anti-identitarian in its orientation. It compels us to refuse both what we are and what we ought to be. Améry's *ressentiment* toward German culture takes multiple forms. It begins with his onomastic rebellion, the change to his name in 1955. Born Hans Mayer in Vienna, Austria in 1912, he adopted the French-sounding anagram Améry. Then, in his writings, Améry harnesses *ressentiment's* energy to resist Germany's exhausting appeals to inclusion, forgiveness, and affective moderation (that is, controlled anger)—all of which work to contain and pacify the excluded and marginalized. *Ressentiment's* indocility, its generative *No!*, signals a “counter-conduct,”⁵⁷ a refusal to be interpellated by the big Other as a “good” citizen.

Ressentiment enriches and sustains the subject's critical ethos, her *voluntary inservitude*. To be resentful means “not to accept oneself as one is.”⁵⁸ It is akin to Foucauldian curiosity in its desire “to throw off familiar ways of thought and to look at the same things in a different way”; we might indeed describe *ressentiment* as a “lack of respect for the traditional hierarchies of what is important and fundamental.”⁵⁹ *Ressentiment* is a recalcitrant mood or orientation that fosters an ethics of self-detachment, a kind of unplugging of the self from her social environment, weakening any attachment to and fetishization of woundedness. More importantly still, *ressentiment* with *parrhēsia* recasts the plight of the wronged subject in universalist terms. As Paul Allen Miller observes, “This work [involving the separation of the self from its environment] is inseparable from the elaboration of the truth, not as a private confession or fantasy but as public speech, as reasoning on the level of the universal and the general.”⁶⁰ *Ressentiment's* promise of universality lies in its collective reach, in imagining my resistance to exploitation and domination as playing a part in a larger struggle for justice. *Ressentiment* here exceeds the narcissistic preoccupations of any particular group; my (people's) suffering and the suffering of other peoples are co-constitutive; we are all co-implicated in this global *No!*—whence the injunction to speak truth to power. These subjects of *ressentiment* are compelled to speak frankly about injustices and combat them wherever they manifest.

As we saw, the irreverent Améry exemplified this form of *ressentiment* in his writings on post-war Germany, but his *parrhēsia* falters or reaches its limits when he broaches the question of Israel. In the Palestinian struggle for liberation against Israeli settler colonialism, Améry clearly sides with the oppressors, neglecting to find

common cause with his fellow oppressed.⁶¹ Améry adopts a crude calculus: "the Jew is still worse off than Frantz Fanon's colonized individual."⁶² In the last instance, the ultimate victim remains the figure of the Jew. He does not see a problem in claiming monopoly over victimhood. This is not a case of "Oppression Olympics," but a description of a historical reality. "Israel is fighting for the life of each of her inhabitants. The Arabs, by contrast, are fighting for their territorial rights," writes Améry.⁶³ The consequences of this dubious and self-serving distinction (life versus territory; as if Native erasure does not simultaneously implicate both terms) are disastrous for the Palestinians.

The champion of authentic *ressentiment* failed to respond ethically and politically to Palestinian *ressentiment*. Not unlike what Améry tried to do in post-war Germany, the Palestinians affirm their righteous anger, their *No!* to the Occupation and dispossession; their *ressentiment* is there "in order that the crime become a moral reality for the criminal [the settler], in order that he be swept into the truth of his atrocity."⁶⁴ Palestinians don't want to normalize Israel's historical and ongoing crimes; they don't want to forgive and forget the settlers' theft of land and ethnic cleansing. This Palestinian plea is ignored, and it is as if Améry substitutes the ineluctable certainty of Zionist identity/the yes of the Israeli state for the negativity of *ressentiment*.

The only connection between me and most Jews the world over is a sense of solidarity with the state of Israel, a commitment that has long since ceased to be a duty of which I need to remind myself. Not that I would want to live there. The country is too hot, too loud, in every respect too alien. Nor do I approve of everything that is done there. I abhor the theocratic tendencies, the religiously inflected nationalism. I have only visited the country once for a short period of time and may never return. Yet even though I do not speak their language and could never adopt their way of life, I am inextricably connected to the people who inhabit this unholy spot and who have been abandoned by the rest of the world. For me, Israel is not an auspicious promise, not a biblically legitimized territorial claim, no Holy Land. It is simply the place where survivors have gathered, a state in which every inhabitant still, and for a long time to come, must fear for his life. My solidarity with Israel is a means of staying loyal to those of my comrades who perished.⁶⁵

Rather than speaking truth to power, Améry becomes an apologist of Zionist power. His musings on Zionism reify rather than challenge the binary opposition between Jew and non-Jew. Instead of questioning Israel's "traditional hierarchies of what is

important and fundamental," Améry reaffirms them. Reflective *indocility* gives way to reflective *submission* to Zionist ideology. There is no reckoning with Israel as a racial/racist state. The fact that his forged Zionist identity is defined in large part by its subjugation of Palestinians is never really a concern. Nor is Améry moved by the harm Zionism did and does to Arab Jews and non-Ashkenazi/non-European Jews.⁶⁶ Améry's Eurocentric Zionism homogenizes Jews by intimately tying their interests to the state of Israel (this move itself reeks of antisemitism to the extent that it identifies Jewishness [all Jews] with the state of Israel: to be anti-Israel/anti-Zionist is to be antisemitic). Defending Israel means first and foremost defending Jews from an anticipated catastrophe, an "über-Auschwitz."⁶⁷ Killing or maiming Palestinians is worth it if it means securing a safe place for Jews. Améry's becoming-Zionist—coterminous with his ethics of self-care—thus feeds Israel's technologies of domination, buttressing a necropolitics, an ethos of hostility toward the Indigenous people of historic Palestine. Améry's self-writings on anti-Zionism, however, do not limit Israel's foes to the multitude of threatening Arabs encircling Israel. Améry fashions his Zionist subjectivity by refashioning—or rather disfiguring—the Left as antisemitic due to its support of the Palestinian cause. Améry's "antisemiticization" of the Left invented Israel's new and enduring enemy, a new antisemite emerging from the side of progressive politics.

To be clear, this does not mean that Améry abandons *ressentiment* tout court. The affect of *ressentiment* does not simply vanish in his writings on Israel and Zionism, but rather undergoes a kind of ideological regression; it is stripped of its destabilizing negativity, decoupled from the virtue of critique. Here, being resentful involves the conversion of historical pain into a form of timeless identity: the victimhood of identity politics. Security and rootedness trump voluntary inservitude. This is Améry's political lapse into the private use of *ressentiment*. The problem here is not strictly speaking the politicization of the affect. Améry's support of Israel depletes *ressentiment's* dynamism, undermines critique's mission (*not to be governed like that*), when it acts in the name of identity, when it authorizes or legitimizes the power apparatus of the nation-state, which, in turn, betrays "the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think." For this reason, identity politics and postmodern/Foucauldian *ressentiment* are polar opposites. If the former converts existential suffering (the stuff of Nietzschean *ressentiment*) into identity, the latter discloses the subject in her radical contingency. Postmodern *ressentiment* mobilizes the affect's negativity, fostering the conditions for the "work on our limits," which, in turn, transforms and elevates the existential pain of the wretched. Such critical labor on the self—inseparable from the work of desubjectification—declines to fetishize victimhood, having no truck with identity

politics' ontologization of woundedness. Rather, *ressentiment* hungers for truth and solidarity. It may have started in the (wounded) self but this affect undergoes a dislocation and opens to others, that is, to a care of others. In its public use, *ressentiment's* ontology is profoundly relational. It attests to and sustains a collective moral feeling grounded in the shared but intolerable condition of exclusion and marginalization. The *No!* of Foucauldian *ressentiment* is universal or it is not.

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Notes

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 119.

² Slavoj Žižek, "A Leftist Plea for 'Eurocentrism,'" *Critical Inquiry* 24, 4 (1998): 1006.

³ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 69.

⁴ Brown, *States of Injury* xi.

⁵ Brown, *States of Injury* 75.

⁶ Robert Pfaller, "How the Other Becomes Our Beast Postmodernity's Production of Ressentiment: A mode d'emploi in Six Steps," in *The Polemics of Ressentiment: Variations on Nietzsche*, ed. Sjoerd van Tuinen (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 131.

⁷ Pfaller, "How the Other Becomes" 129.

⁸ Jürgen Schaflechner and Tim van den Hoff, *The Toxic Reigns of Resentment*, (Bullfrog Films, 2020).

⁹ Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 50.

¹⁰ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 46.

¹¹ Foucault, "What Is Critique?," trans. Kevin Paul Geiman, in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 386.

¹² Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 42.

¹³ Mary Gallagher, "Ressentiment and Dissensus: The Place of Critique in the Contemporary Academy," in *Re-Thinking Ressentiment: On the Limits of Criticism and the Limits of its Critics*, ed. Jeanne Riou and Mary Gallagher (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016), 196.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" in *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 59. Kant's formulation recalls René Descartes' first maxim of his "provisional moral code," which restricts the boldness of his epistemological project. In the exercise of hyperbolic doubt, the philosopher simultaneously qualifies the transgressiveness of his approach by continuing "to obey the laws and customs of my country, holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood, and governing myself in all other matters according to the most moderate and least extreme opinions—the opinions commonly accepted in practice by the most sensible of those with whom I should have to live" (René Descartes, "Discourse on the Method" in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, vol. 1*, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], 123).

- ¹⁶ Foucault, of course, was quite hostile to the discourse of the universal. Todd McGowan stresses the dominance of Foucault in the circles of identity politics, the dominant paradigm of today's politics: "Michel Foucault provides the model for contemporary politics, even among those who have never heard of him. Foucault is the leading theoretical light for the move from a universalist program to particular political interventions" (Todd McGowan, *Universality and Identity Politics* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2020], 113). The above account of Foucault's relation to universality complements if not complicates the standard portrait of Foucault we give in *Universal Politics*. See also Ilan Kapoor and Zahi Zalloua, *Universal Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 64–69.
- ¹⁶ Originally published as "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung" in the journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.
- ¹⁷ Kant, "An Answer to the Question" 60.
- ¹⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008), 143.
- ¹⁹ Žižek, *Violence* 143.
- ²⁰ Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), 199.
- ²¹ Žižek, "A Leftist Plea for 'Eurocentrism'" 1002.
- ²² "And Kant... proposes to Frederick II... a sort of contract—what might be called the contract of rational despotism with free reason: the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle that must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason. (Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 37).
- ²³ Žižek, *Pandemic! COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020), 10.
- ²⁴ Žižek, *Pandemic!* 103.
- ²⁵ Žižek, "Les Non-Dupes Errent," *The Philosophical Salon* (September 20, 2021). <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/les-non-dupes-errent/>.
- ²⁶ Žižek, "Beyond a Neoconservative Communism," *The Philosophical Salon* (November 15, 2021). <https://thephilosophicalsalon.com/beyond-a-neoconservative-communism/>.
- ²⁷ Frédéric Gros, *Disobey: A Philosophy of Resistance*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2020), 135.
- ²⁸ Foucault, "Confronting Governments: Human Rights," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al (New York: New Press, 2000): 475.
- ²⁹ Žižek, "Living in the Time of Monsters," *Counterpoints* 422 (2012): 33.
- ³⁰ Žižek, "Response to Zalloua," in *Žižek Responds!*, ed. Dominik Finkelde and Todd McGowan (New York: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).
- ³¹ Žižek, "Response to Zalloua."
- ³² Kennan Ferguson, "No Politics," in *The Big No*, ed. Kennan Ferguson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), x. I am however skeptical of any essentializing of *yes*, any claim that adopting it always entails compromise or complicity. Jacques Derrida's *yes*, his call for unconditional hospitality, couldn't be further removed from identity politics: "Yes *to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female" (Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000], 77).
- ³³ Ferguson, "No Politics" x.
- ³⁴ Žižek, "We Need a Socialist Reset, Not a Corporate 'Great Reset,'" *Jacobin* (December 31, 2020). <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/12/slavoj-zizek-socialism-great-reset>.

- ³⁶ We must add that there is also “identity politics envy” among the Right. Donald Trump masterfully exploited this desire for the recognition of inflated White victimhood.
- ³⁷ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: A Work in Progress,” in *Michel Foucault, Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 239.
- ³⁸ Foucault, “Sexuality and Solitude,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault 1954–84, vol. 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 177.
- ³⁹ Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics” 237.
- ⁴⁰ To the “universal intellectual” (exemplified in Jean-Paul Sartre), Foucault opposes the specific intellectual. This new type of intellectual leaves behind the prior lofty rhetoric of universal emancipation; she has abandoned “the modality of the ‘universal,’ the ‘exemplary,’ the ‘just-and-true-for-all’” (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Colin Gordon [New York: Random House, 1980], 68).
- ⁴¹ Foucault, “The Ethics of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *The Final Foucault*, ed. James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 11, emphasis added.
- ⁴² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 18.
- ⁴³ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 9.
- ⁴⁴ Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 81–2. Likewise, in *The Undercommons*, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten undertake to transfigure the coordinates of the prison debate itself, since, for them, what is at stake is “not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery” (Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 42. Their plea for the undercommons stems from a struggle for radical justice underpinned by a *ressentiment*, insisting on “the right to refuse what has been refused to you” (Jack Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and For the Undercommons,” in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* [New York: Minor Compositions, 2013], 8).
- ⁴⁵ Foucault, “Afterword: The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 216.
- ⁴⁶ Foucault, “What is Critique?” 384.
- ⁴⁷ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (New York: Verso, 2002), 27.
- ⁴⁸ Foucault, “The Regard for Truth,” trans. Paul Patton, *Art and Text* 16 (1984): 29.
- ⁴⁹ Foucault, *Fearless Speech* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 12.
- ⁵⁰ “Only I possessed, and still possess, the moral truth of the blows that even today roar in my skull” (Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits* 70).
- ⁵¹ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 11.
- ⁵² Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits* xi.
- ⁵³ Žižek, *Violence* 189–90.
- ⁵⁴ Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 126.
- ⁵⁵ Coulthard, *Red Skin* 110.

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- ⁵⁵ Foucault, "What is Revolution?" trans. Lysa Hochroth, in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 100.
- ⁵⁶ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 41.
- ⁵⁷ Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2007), 209.
- ⁵⁸ Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 41.
- ⁵⁹ Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. Alan Sheridan et al. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 328.
- ⁶⁰ Paul Allen Miller, *Foucault's Seminars on Antiquity: Learning to Speak the Truth* (New York: Bloomsbury 2022), 130.
- ⁶¹ "I know as well as the next man that Israel does find itself in the disagreeable role of being an occupying power. I would not dream of countenancing everything that various Israeli governments do" (Améry, "Virtuous Antisemitism," in *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*, ed. Marlene Gallner [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022], 36).
- ⁶² Améry, *At the Mind's Limits* 38.
- ⁶³ Améry, "The New Left's Approach to 'Zionism,'" in *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*, ed. Marlene Gallner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 44.
- ⁶⁴ Améry, *At the Mind's Limits* 70.
- ⁶⁵ Améry, "My Jewishness," in *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*, ed. Marlene Gallner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 85.
- ⁶⁶ Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* (1988): 1–35.
- ⁶⁷ Améry, "Jews, Leftists, Leftist Jews," in *Essays on Antisemitism, Anti-Zionism, and the Left*, ed. Marlene Gallner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022), 49. Ironically, the natural(ized) gesture of identifying Jews with Israel is itself antisemitic to the extent that it generalizes and pretends to speak for all Jews.