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# The global politics of ugly feelings: pessimism and resentment in a mimetic world

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## Abstract

Negative emotions are not what they used to be. As the world edges closer and closer to the brink of a dark political dystopia, sentiments of disenchantment such as pessimism and resentment stand out as dominant moods of our age. Despite being once endowed with a critical and creative potential, today these 'ugly feelings' sustain forms of politics that are ambivalent and equivocal. Against the background of a highly mimetic social ontology, where affects mutate into memes at dazzling speed, these sentiments of disenchantments are appropriated by the political right as well as the left, hanging dangerously between reaction and emancipation. The chapter provides a diagnosis of their re-emergence, highlighting their common phenomenological matrix, their shared dysphoric and non-cathartic nature, and their ambivalent political work.

## The world at a loss

Contemporary world politics seems to be-hang on the brink of dystopia. The looming threat of environmental catastrophe, the ongoing humanitarian crisis linked to mass migration and a never-ending global economic recession stand in the background of a politics gone rogue. Resurgent across much of the world, fascism has made considerable inroads in the Americas, in Asia and in Europe. After a phase of gradual erosion, democratic institutions are now shaken to their core by mass-movements and street protests seeking to redefine the perimeters and parameters of political space. Finally, global social transformations are threatening long-established identities, and their entitlements, while an increasing number of political systems are actively attacking freedoms and progressively restricting rights. The sense of crisis, failure and loss is palpable across much of the world.

In 2015 the media colossus Bloomberg decided to rename its yearly financial forecasts as 'The Pessimist's Guide to the Year'. Notably, the scenarios featured in the 2019 edition were generally deemed to be particularly worrying not because of their fantastical nature – but rather, because they had all already 'happened in the past. Just not all at once'.<sup>1</sup> This sense of doom and gloom is further mobilised and capitalised upon by world leaders. On 20 January 2017 the US President Donald Trump delivered his inauguration speech by depicting a landscape worthy of Edgar Allan Poe, in which through a glass darkly he presented America as a scene of 'carnage and catastrophe', threatened at every corner by enemies within and without.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Trump channelled and popularised a now widely-held dark fantasy – one that reflects an annihilation anxiety in which the world braces itself from falling into an abyss of dread and extinction.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, in countries such as the US, life expectancy amongst the once prosperous white middle class continues to drop due to the

staggering rise of the so-called ‘diseases of despair’ – drug abuse, including the opioid crisis, alcoholism and suicide.<sup>4</sup>

All this marks a striking departure from the mood that characterised the final decades of the twentieth century and the turn to the new millennium. Three decades after the world-changing events of 1989, the much-trumpeted triumph of liberal democracy, the affirmation of the neoliberal economic model, and the expansion of the zone of freedom all seem a long distant memory, a broken illusion, a lost paradigm. The failure of the liberal agenda has ushered much of the world into a phase of disenchantment and retreat. The optimism of the end of the Cold War has thus given way to the pessimism of the twenty-first century.

Tellingly, the current global crisis has been readily compared to that of the 1920s-30s when, in the words of EH Carr, the ‘liberal utopia’ collapsed under the weight of its own illusions and the dark realities of power politics, nationalism and genocidal violence (re-)emerged from the underground.<sup>5</sup> And yet, the current moment also resonates with earlier crises; indeed, it harks back to that sense of disorientation, confusion, and dread that nineteenth-century existentialists expressed towards a society transfigured by modernity, with its dazzling yet profoundly alienating ways of life.<sup>6</sup>

What these historical moments have in common is the coming to the surface of ‘ugly feelings’, negative collective moods, sentiments of disenchantments, which have significant yet ambiguous political import.<sup>7</sup> Resentment and pessimism stand out as particularly important, and sufficiently ‘ugly’, contemporary dispositions. This chapter provides a reading of the global political implications of their current re-emergence. To do so, I firstly examine the common characteristics of these ugly feelings, highlighting their shared dysphoric roots, their latent and non-cathartic nature, and their ambivalent emotional work. Secondly, I expand on the political consequences of this ambiguity, noting how ‘negative emotions’ can serve rather different political purposes along the conservative-progressive, reactionary-emancipatory spectrum. The next two sections focus on resentment and pessimism respectively, contrasting these negative emotions but also highlighting their overlaps and embedding them in the current political scenario to show how they are mobilized in contemporary global politics. The chapter will conclude with an assessment of the mimetic effects of the circulation of negative affects, considering the strategies, tactics and antidotes at our disposal in the process of stemming the global contagion of ugly feelings.

### **Sentiments of disenchantment as ‘ugly feelings’: locating pessimism and resentment**

Before dissecting pessimism and resentment *qua* sentiments of disenchantment, it might be useful to offer a preliminary definition of these dispositions that highlights their common phenomenological matrix, namely the experience of failure and loss. If resentment can be understood as the emotional response to the experience of being unfairly treated, namely a response to a failure of justice – and the loss of trust, or face, that ordinarily comes with it – pessimism is the mental and emotional disposition that acknowledges and anticipates the possibility of failure and loss as inherent, or inevitable, in human affairs. Instantiations of loss and failure include the fallibility of the human condition, the loss of existential meaning, and/or the failure of those personal or collective programmes designed to achieve greater happiness in one’s life or, indeed, in civilisation at large.<sup>8</sup> Pessimism and resentment are

likely to become dominant collective moods when loss and failure ~~become dominant~~ are rife in the historical conjuncture: in such a world, disenchantment prevails.

As I argue in the following two sections, there is a lot that distinguishes resentment and pessimism. And yet, because these two dispositions stem from a similar *problematique* – failure and loss, and the disenchantment that comes with these – in this section I consider them together. The value of doing so is also to highlight a number of revealing overlaps and similarities, especially when it comes to their political extensions and implications.

To start with, both pessimism and resentment can be characterised as dysphoric dispositions (as opposed to euphoric ones).<sup>9</sup> Dysphoric emotions are difficult to bear in that they come with or convey a sense of unease, pain, dissatisfaction, displeasure. People experiencing pessimism or resentment are, if one sticks to the Greek origin of the term dysphoria, literally ‘feeling bad’ about some distressing, discomforting or disappointing reality. They are in a ‘bad place’, ie., in an emotional *dystopia* of some kind. These bad feelings, or bad places, however, are distinct from specific psychological conditions such as depression or anxiety – which they can indeed lead to, though not necessarily. Secondly, pessimism and resentment are both semantically and syntactically negative. On the one hand, they are saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values, associated as they are with unhappy stereotypes and characterisations (such as the pessimist’s proverbial black cloud hanging over their head). On the other, they are organised around trajectories of repulsion rather than attraction. Pessimism and resentment, in other words, seek to create or maintain distance from disappointing states of affairs by moving away from them, or standing against them, rather than embracing them out of a *philic* friendship with things.

Thirdly, and perhaps even more interestingly, both pessimism and resentment can be considered latent and non-cathartic emotions – that is, emotions that have nothing of the immediacy or suddenness of feelings such as fear or anger, and their outbursts. Rather, pessimism and resentment are rather characterised by flatness and ongoingness. The lack of drama and lack of release associated with these affects means that, unlike anger or rage, these dispositions can be sustained over a long time, often at a low or latent intensity, like an arrow kept in permanent tension by a nagging sense of disappointment, yet never released from its bow. Fourthly, pessimism and resentment may well be triggered by specific situations, aimed at clearly defined objects, and felt by particular subjects. Yet, they tend to pulverise and refract into loose, generic moods that, on the one hand, lack the strategic clarity and goal-orientedness of other negative feelings, such as anger or fear; on the other, are predicated on a blurred, rather than sharp, distinction between subject and object. Finally, and relatedly, these sentiments stand at the margin rather than at the centre of those political projects and theories built around grander and more prestigious feelings such as fear and anger. Suffice here to think of the centrality of fear to the political theory of Thomas Hobbes and Niccolò Machiavelli, or indeed the IR tradition of realism. Alternatively, one can think of anger and rage, and their centrality to theories of justice, from Aristotle to today’s postcolonial literature.<sup>10</sup> Pessimism and resentment pale in comparison to these distinguished political emotions and don’t have as noble a pedigree in political theory and IR. However, they do excel in the more gloomy task of being ‘sentiments of disenchantment’, in the apt characterisation offered by Italian philosopher Paolo Virno.<sup>11</sup>

According to Virno, sentiments of disenchantment are distinguished by two key features. On the one hand, they have historically occupied a special place in the critique of modernity – thus, the strong link between negative affects and the Frankfurt School tradition of ‘negative thinking’. On the other hand, sentiments of disenchantments are slippery and complex, ambiguous and ambivalent. Indeed, the politics they sustain is not just ambivalent but also equivocal – it can be radical or reactionary, progressive or conservative, and always needs discerning in context.

Regarding the first point, negative affects such as alienation, cynicism, or even anxiety were historically endowed with a critical and creative potential because of the way they fuelled a form of ‘negative thinking’ that sustained a critique of modernity. Amongst critical theorists, Herbert Marcuse illustrated most vividly the power of negative thinking in revealing those aspects of domination that revolutionary practice aimed to overcome.<sup>12</sup> Marcuse argued that only a critique fuelled by doubt and cynicism would be able to cut through **not only** the material conditions of exploitation, **but as well as** the social and psychological mechanisms that concealed such exploitation. That is why cultivating a critical attitude able to embrace feelings of resentment and pessimism was deemed necessary, and in fact emancipatory. Echoing Adorno and Marcuse, John Holloway recently argued that negative thinking ‘is the only form of thought adequate to a wrong world. [...] It is the wrongness of the world that makes dialectics or negative thought necessary [...]. If the world is wrong, *then we are negative beings*: our very existence is a movement against’.<sup>13</sup> According to a host of critical scholars, therefore, negative emotions did important political work in the twentieth century.

Arguably, however, in post-Fordist societies these feelings no longer have an *automatic* critical potential. As Antonio Negri noted, in the global, postmodern modes of production affect has acquired ‘fundamental productive qualifications’: thus, emotions are mobilized, monetized and actively controlled.<sup>14</sup> The injunction of productivity today has entirely captured the affective, emotive sphere, rendering emotions just another dimension of performance, just as life becomes another dimension of work.<sup>15</sup> What happens then to the emancipatory power of negative feelings? Paolo Virno argues that ‘so-called advanced technologies do not so much provoke alienation, a scattering of some long-vanished “familiarity”, as reduce the experience of even the most radical alienation to a professional profile’.<sup>16</sup> Virno warns that negative emotions have been perversely integrated as the operating requirement of such societies, fully reabsorbed and reconfigured, perfectly functional and hegemonic in our contemporary precarious lives: ‘nihilism, once the dark side of technology’s productive power, has become one of its fundamental ingredients, a prized commodity’.<sup>17</sup>

It is fair to ask ourselves, therefore, whether negative emotions today are still what they used to be. My wager is that we cannot automatically associate any critical or emancipatory power to the affects of resentment or pessimism today – and this is obvious when we consider how these moods are mobilised by both the right and the left in contemporary global politics, lending their power to both conservative and progressive projects. The ambivalence of these ‘sentiments of disenchantment’ therefore must be placed in full view. What kind of political subjectivity do resentment and pessimism sustain today? What is the global politics of these ugly feelings? In the next two sections I turn to each sentiment in search of answers.

### **The ambivalent politics of resentment / *ressentiment***

As an ugly feeling, resentment has a bad name and a long history.<sup>18</sup> Ordinarily, resentment is considered a negative political emotion – not only corrosive of human relationships, but detrimental, on a collective and political scale, to civic compassion and social order, as liberal philosopher Martha Nussbaum has most recently restated.<sup>19</sup> A long tradition in modern Western political thought – from Grotius to Norbert Elias – has attached a stigma to ‘red’ emotions such as anger, rage and indeed resentment, considering these primarily as destructive forces to be contained by reason, or transcended through charity. Interestingly, however, a different reading of this ugly feeling has recently re-emerged in political theory and moral philosophy.

According to this counter-narrative that draws on the Aristotelian reading of anger as a morally useful affect, resentment has been rediscovered as a virtuous affect. Rather than being the enemy of political causes, resentment has been viewed, in the words of Adam Smith, as the ‘guardian of justice’<sup>20</sup> – that is, the emotional state which, more than any other sentiment, including charity and forgiveness, proves that we care about and are ‘committed to certain moral standards, as regulative of social life’.<sup>21</sup> Rather than an emotion incompatible with social order, as ‘a passion for justice denied’, writes Robert Solomon, ‘resentment lies at the heart of democracy’.<sup>22</sup> Resentment is not only an appropriate individual response to failures of justice, but it is also an indispensable attitude to cultivate if an overall degree of fairness is to be maintained in society. There is virtue in resentment, in other words, as Holocaust survivor Jean Améry famously claimed.<sup>23</sup>

However, there is yet another story that can be told about resentment, one that highlights a further ambiguity in this sentiment as well as the ambivalent nature of the politics inspired by it. This story is well encapsulated in the slight literal variation that separates the two terms commonly used to refer to this sentiment – resentment and *ressentiment*. If resentment has been given a virtuous face when it indicates a legitimate response to a perceived injustice, *ressentiment* has traditionally been painted in less favourable terms and equated with metaphysical envy and narcissistic rage.

While resentment is understood to denote a legitimate sense of anger, and a desire for justice in the face of an injury, *ressentiment* indicates the pernicious and self-defeating folding in of this emotion onto itself. It is the spiteful and counterproductive mentality cultivated by victims or ‘slaves’, in Nietzsche’s famous characterisation.<sup>24</sup> According to Max Scheler’s reading of Nietzsche’s *ressentiment*, the origin of this emotion lies not in questions of justice but in questions of recognition, in particular the envy that derives from comparing oneself to others and resenting one’s inferiority. ‘Envy [...] is the strongest source of *ressentiment*. It is as if it whispers continually: “I can forgive everything, but not that you are – that you are what you are – that I am not what you are – indeed that I am not you”’.<sup>25</sup> *Ressentiment* is therefore a frustrated, ossified and ultimately generalised form of resentment; it is the affect that underpins the construction of scapegoats, the exercise of revenge, and the affirmation of a negative or inverted form of enjoyment. For the subject experiencing *ressentiment*, enjoyment perversely comes more from the misfortunes of others than an increase in one’s well-being.

Interestingly, a number of contemporary political and social theorists, such as Wendy Brown, William Connolly but also René Girard, seem to be in agreement that *ressentiment*, rather

than resentment, is one the dominant moods of our age. The conditions of late modernity, with the apparently limitless expansion of neo-liberalism and its logic of extreme competition, create the breeding ground for an explosion not so much of resentment but of *ressentiment*. As Wendy Brown stated, individuals are 'starkly accountable, yet dramatically impotent' – as such, they are 'quite literally seething with *ressentiment*'.<sup>26</sup> Further, René Girard argued that rivalry and envy, already normally present in human relations given their inevitably mimetic nature, have escalated out of proportions in late modernity due to the very operating principles of liberal and capitalist societies. This creates an epidemic of envy and *ressentiment*.<sup>27</sup> William Connolly submitted that contemporary *ressentiment* is not only about the return of a Nietzschean, existential resentment against mortality and our finitude, but it is also about 'stored resentment that has poisoned the soul and migrated to places where it is hidden and denied', a *ressentiment* grown out of an accumulation of justified resentments' that got somehow congealed and encoded into the political sphere.<sup>28</sup>

While resentment has been given credit as a negative emotion with critical potential, *ressentiment* has not been considered generative of emancipatory possibilities. Gilles Deleuze proposed that far from being an active and positive mode of political action, *ressentiment* is an alienating and non-emancipatory negative emotion, one that decomposes resistance and incapacitates contestation.<sup>29</sup> More recently, Éric Fassin has looked at the question of resentment and *ressentiment* in connection with the contemporary return of populism.<sup>30</sup> In his recent book *Populisme: le grand ressentiment*, Fassin recognises once again the ambivalent politics of resentment which, on the one hand, has been appropriated by the right to fuel, as *ressentiment*, an increasing xenophobic sentiment against migrants and minorities; but, on the other hand, has also been reintroduced, *qua* resentment, in the discourse of the new 'populist left' to inspire the struggle against economic elites and for greater economic and social equality. Resentment therefore emerges as an ambivalent and ambiguous expression of our contemporary disenchantment – its political work is complex, equivocal and ever shifting. Can the same be said about pessimism?

### **Pessimism as melancholia: on the creative possibilities of negativity**

As a sad passion, in Spinozan terms, pessimism shares a number of characteristics with resentment. This dysphoric, non-cathartic, flat emotion suggests a degree of suspended or obstructed agency – either in the subject, or in the context that gave rise to such feelings. Moods associated with pessimism, such as cynicism and above all melancholia, were central to nineteenth-century existentialism in the same way as resentment. As signals of radical alienation from the system and, as such, affects with critical potential, these moods were also valued in the process of critique of modernity. However, can the same be said now about contemporary forms of pessimism? Is the politics of pessimism today as ambiguous and slippery as the politics of resentment, caught between emancipatory and reactionary tendencies? In what follows I concentrate on pessimism understood as melancholia, starting from how one of the foremost pessimists of the last century, Sigmund Freud, introduced and understood such concepts.

The series of works that properly started psychoanalysis at the turn of the twentieth century are arguably imbued with a pessimism that, on the one hand, has survived until today and, on the other, reflects Freud's own sense of helplessness in the face of the human condition,

as well as the specific cultural and political developments leading up to the two World Wars. Freud's pessimism developed gradually to assume an ontological and metaphysical, as well as cultural and ethical, nature.<sup>31</sup>

The foundation of Freud's ontological and metaphysical pessimism can be traced to the rejection of the Enlightenment's optimism regarding the place of rationality and freedom of the will in human nature. Freud's inquiry into the unconscious is nothing but an attempt to debunk the illusion that human beings determine their own destiny out of a rational and realistic pursuit of happiness. To start with, Freud's theory of subjectivity places the conscious, rational self (the ego) in a complex triangle of forces which constantly threaten to overpower it – some of these wholly unconscious (the id), some super-conscious (the super-ego). Either way, to use Freud's famous expression, our rational self, our ego, is not 'master in its own house'.<sup>32</sup> As a consequence, any sense of conscious control and direction over our own lives is bound to be severely limited; indeed, it is an illusion. Happiness, furthermore, is more futile and less realistic a prospect than its opposite, pain. Although our lives are dictated by instincts aimed at satisfying 'the programme of the pleasure principle [...], this programme is at loggerheads with the whole world'. As Freud laconically notes in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, 'one feels inclined to say that the intention that man should be 'happy' is not included in the plan of "Creation"'.<sup>33</sup>

From these ontological and metaphysical considerations, a strong form of ethical and cultural pessimism follows. Firstly, as Freud readily concedes in his 1920 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, love and our libidinal instincts provide only one of the two foundations upon which our existence is built – the other foundation being an equally powerful set of instincts, born out of aggression and driven by the death principle. 'As well as Eros, there [is] an instinct of death. The phenomena of life could be explained from the concurrent or mutually opposing action of these two instincts'.<sup>34</sup> Aggressiveness is an 'indestructible' feature of human nature, admits Freud after approvingly citing the Latin maxim '*homo homini lupus*'.<sup>35</sup> If the father of psychoanalysis was pessimistic about the human condition, he was even more disenchanted about the future of civilization. That the instinct to destroy and kill has been a constant force since the dawn of humanity is testified by Freud's assertion in *Totem and Taboo* that, at the root of civilisation and culture, one finds murder – namely, the foundational murder of the primal father.<sup>36</sup> Civilisation, therefore, is nothing but an immense attempt at maintaining peace – a fragile state of affairs perpetually 'threatened with disintegration'.<sup>37</sup>

The two World Wars only reinforced Freud's sense of the irreparably flawed nature of the human endeavour, revealing how unstable (and hypocritical) our civilizational foundations were, and how illusory the chances of peace. In his 1915 essay *Timely Reflections on War and Death*, Freud writes: 'war cannot be done away with; as long as the conditions of life of the various nations are so different and the conflicts between them so violent, wars will be inevitable [...]. We remember the old proverb: *Si vis pacem, para bellum*. This might be the time to alter it to read as follows: *Si vis vitam, para mortem*. If you wish to endure life, prepare yourself for death'.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, in his 1933 exchange of letters with Albert Einstein, with Nazism on the rise in Germany, Freud restated his belief that any attempt to outlaw war was bound to fail: 'The ideal condition of things would of course be a community of men who had subordinated their instinctual life to the dictatorship of reason... But in all probability that is a Utopian expectation'.<sup>39</sup>



The problem of loss and death, so vividly imprinted in Freud's consciousness by two World Wars, the loss of his beloved daughter Sophie, and his own persecution as a Jewish intellectual, occupies a central place in Freud's entire psychoanalytical palimpsest. The question of how to cope with loss and death animates, in particular, Freud's 1917 paradigm-altering reflections on *Mourning and Melancholia*.<sup>40</sup> Arguably, this contribution provides an essential angle into the varieties and complexities of pessimism, both past and contemporary. While in his early work Freud understood melancholia as a form of depression of variable intensity, drawing on the then popular theory of neurasthenia, two decades later Freud identified mourning and melancholia more specifically as two different responses to the same problem, that of loss. If mourning is the normal mechanism through which we struggle to come to terms with the loss of an object to which we are consciously attached, melancholia is the affect generated by our inability to fully integrate loss. Appalled by the loss of the loved object, the melancholic subject refuses to let it go, to the point that they identify and fuse with it, at the expense of their own self: 'in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself'.<sup>41</sup> Thus, despite the pain and disappointment that its loss has caused, the loved object is safe, but the melancholic subject is not – they start tormenting and criticising themselves, losing faith in their own self. 'If the love for the object, which cannot be abandoned while the object itself is abandoned, has fled into narcissistic identification, hatred goes to work on this substitute object. [...] And this signifies the satisfaction of tendencies of sadism and hatred, which are [...] turned back against the subject's own self'.<sup>42</sup> This is how, according to Freud, pessimism turns into melancholia and, oftentimes, into a form of mania – via a narcissistic regression and an unacknowledged rejection of the ambivalence the subject felt towards the loved object in the first place.

If this is Freud's understanding of pessimism and melancholia, it is worth asking now what the political work of pessimism and, in particular, melancholia might be. As in the case of resentment, my argument is that this sentiment of disenchantment has translated into an ambivalent, equivocal and at times perverse kind of politics, suspended between action and reaction. A contemporary of Freud, Walter Benjamin, was the first to warn against the prevalence of a certain pessimistic, indeed melancholic, attitude especially amongst progressives on the Left. Benjamin mocked self-professed radicals of his time for merely mimicking the needs of the proletariat while being devoid of any genuine revolutionary praxis, thus providing a 'papier-maché' version of 'the revolutionary gesture, the raised arm, the clenched fist'.<sup>43</sup> Benjamin was, in other words, concerned about the way in which critique could turn into an empty and narcissistic nihilism, a 'negativistic quiet' which provided these intellectuals 'comfortable arrangements [...] in an uncomfortable situation'.<sup>44</sup>

More recently, the debate about the future of the Left after 1989, the crisis of social democratic parties, and the global recession of 2008, has once again trodden on the terrain of pessimism and melancholia, assessing the political potential and pitfalls of these moods. In a 1999 piece titled 'Resisting Left Melancholy', Wendy Brown returned to both Freud and Benjamin to launch an attack against the way the Left had fundamentally failed to re-organise and re-structure itself after the end of Communism.<sup>45</sup> Brown accused the Left of being 'more attached to its impossibility than to its potential fruitfulness, to its own marginality and failure rather than its hopefulness'.<sup>46</sup> Although to some extent inevitable, given the Left's siding with the underprivileged and the marginal, progressives had developed an unhealthy, traumatic attachment to defeat, including the historical defeats of

the twentieth century. The Left, notes Brown, seems to be caught in 'a structure of melancholic attachment to a certain strain of its own dead past, whose spirit is ghostly, whose structure of desire is backward looking and punishing'.<sup>47</sup> It is precisely the sentiments of pessimism and melancholia 'about broken promises and lost compasses' that create 'potentially conservative and even self-destructive undersides of putatively progressive political aims'.<sup>48</sup> Similarly to Benjamin, Brown intended to warn against the subtle nihilism of melancholia and the way this risked incapacitating and paralysing the Left precisely at a time of great need for a revived left-wing politics.

In contrast to Brown's arguments, Enzo Traverso presented an alternative view of a melancholic left-wing politics, one able to depathologize melancholia, celebrate a form of healthy, rather than self-satisfied, nihilism and rehabilitate it as a potential site of resistance.<sup>49</sup> Traverso agrees that after the 'eclipse of utopias', the Left cannot but be burdened with a sadness it cannot dispel, which comes from defeat. However, sadness, detachment and irony can be points of departure—notwithstanding the imperatives of political action. After all, the transformation of the world, he suggests, can never be anything more than a 'melancholic bet'.<sup>50</sup> Along similar lines, in *Capitalist Realism* Mark Fisher offered important reflections on the role of negative feelings in building a progressive future.<sup>51</sup> Although recognising that there is probably no escape from neoliberalism and its pervasiveness, Fisher is critical especially of that kind of left-wing politics which has replaced class analysis with moralism, solidarity with guilt and fear – appropriating forms of bourgeois nihilism that traditionally would be the purview of conservative movements. Recuperating the lessons of Marcuse and Adorno, Fisher contrasts this form of impotent melancholia and nihilistic pessimism with the real power of negative thinking, which can only consist of a conscious and deliberate politicisation of the overwhelmingly negative emotions of our age.<sup>52</sup> The project of turning depression into anger was not one that Fisher himself could carry out in his own life.<sup>53</sup> However, I would argue it remains his most important legacy.

### Feeling dangerously – final thoughts

It would be bad enough to inhabit a world swallowed by rising tides of negative emotions. What this chapter sought to demonstrate is that the real complexity of the ugly feelings currently sweeping across the four continents is their treacherous, ambiguous and duplicitous nature. Resentment and pessimism have both gone global and constitute an important affective vector of international politics today. And yet, if there is certainly virtue in 'feeling bad', i.e., feeling resentful or pessimistic, when this condition corresponds respectively to a clear commitment to pursue values questions such as of global justice, or expose the affective micro-foundations that sustains neoliberal forms of exploitation and emancipation, or indeed diagnoses what may be wrong in the world, these sentiments of disenchantments can just as easily be hijacked by global political actors in an attempt to is less apparent when they convey a sustain narcissistic, self-satisfied fixation-subjectivities, incapable to act politically and confined to narrow horizons, that restricts our horizon and paralyzes our ability to act. Spinoza famously argued that, insofar as it incapacitates action, inspiring sad passions is necessary for the exercise of power and indeed functional to the maintenance of hegemonic regimes and the stifling of any resistance.<sup>54</sup> Before and *contra* Nietzsche, he was unconvinced that pessimism could lead to the life-affirming joy necessary for acting in the world – just as he condemned resentment and, *a fortiori*, *ressentiment* in as

categorical a way as Nietzsche two centuries later. Therefore, today we should be asking ourselves whether the global hegemony of deeply conservative projects such as neoliberalism, or the growing threat of global fascism, can truly be tackled without questioning the envious, narcissistic and nihilistic affects on which these developments critically rely.

There is, however, another complication to acknowledge. While the distinction between resentment and *ressentiment*, and between pessimism and melancholia, may be clear analytically, it certainly is not always clear in practice. When white masculinity in the US today can claim to be legitimately resentful towards minorities, invoking in all seriousness the status of 'victim' – despite it being objectively hegemonic, and in fact conveniently using this discourse of victimhood to actually re-assert its privilege – we are evidently confronted with two problems. On the one hand, the particularly slippery problem of how to adjudicate between the subjective and objective status of emotions that are structurally equivocal, built as they are on a poorly formed, if not wholly blurred, distinction between subject and object. On the other hand, the problem of how quickly these distinctions evaporate in the light of the highly mimetic, or viral, nature of today's social ontology.<sup>55</sup> The pace and intensity with which affect circulates globally today, not least thanks to social media, means that contagion effects are par for the course and that affects morph and mutate into memes at dazzling, uncontrollable speed. If this impairs our ability to unequivocally read contemporary moods and use them diagnostically to know something about our age, it may teach us the virtues of irony and humility which may well be necessary to read a complex present.

In conclusion, pessimism and resentment may be hard to decipher and discern today and yet, this is the task that lies ahead for us, albeit in rather inauspicious circumstances. The contemporary capture of affect by neoliberalism, in particular, is bringing the process of atomization and alienation of society to perfection. The possibility of consciousness – at both the collective and individual level – is actively controlled, limited and perverted. It is all the more urgent, therefore, to adopt a critical, almost genealogical approach to today's ugly feelings, an approach able not least to keep open the possibility of reconstituting them. As Paolo Virno warned three decades ago already, in a cautious challenge to the power of negativity, 'every new demand for liberation can do nothing but retrace, if under an opposing banner, the paths along which the experiences of the opportunist, the cynic, and the pessimist, have already run their course'.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bloomberg, 'The Pessimist's Guide to 2019: Fire, Flood and Famine', 14 December 2018, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/pessimists-guide-to-2019/> [accessed 18 January 2019].

<sup>2</sup> Michael Ure, 'Trump's Gothic Populism', *Public Seminar*, 15 February, 2017, available at [http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/02/trumps-gothic-populism/#\\_ednref3](http://www.publicseminar.org/2017/02/trumps-gothic-populism/#_ednref3) [accessed 24 January 2019].

<sup>3</sup> David P. Levine, *Dark Fantasy* (London: Karnac Books, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Joshua Cohen, "'Diseases of Despair' Contribute to Declining US Life Expectancy', *Forbes*, 19 July 2018, available at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshuacohen/2018/07/19/diseases-of-despair-contribute-to-declining-u-s-life-expectancy/> [accessed 24 January 2019].

<sup>5</sup> Carr, E.H., *The Twenty Years Crisis* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, [1939] 2016).

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<sup>6</sup> [Walter Kaufmann, \*Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre\* \(New York: Penguin, 1975\).](#)

<sup>7</sup> For the important debate concerning the difference between emotions, mood and affect, see Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and, in an IR context,

Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, 'Theorizing Emotions in World Politics', *International Theory* 6, no. 3

(2014): 500–3. In this chapter, however, I will use such terms interchangeably.

<sup>8</sup> See Ned Lebow, 'Pessimism in International Relations', in this volume.

<sup>9</sup> For an insightful dissection of a variety of 'ugly feelings' as sentiments of disenchantments, see Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005). In this section I interrogate and extend Ngai's diagnostics.

<sup>10</sup> See, respectively, Arash Heydarian Pashakhanlou, *Realism and Fear in International Relations: Morgenthau, Waltz and Mearsheimer Reconsidered* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) and Mary Whitebrook, 'Love and Anger as Political Emotions', in *The Politics of Compassion*, eds. Michael Ure and Mervyn Frost (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Paolo Virno, 'The Ambivalence of Disenchantment', in Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Herbert Marcuse, 'A Note on Dialectic', in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds. *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum Books), 445.

<sup>13</sup> John Holloway, Fernando Matamoros, Sergio Tischler, eds., *Negativity and Revolution: Adorno and Political Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), page 8, emphasis added.

<sup>14</sup> Antonio Negri, 'Value and Affect', trans. M. Hardt, *Boundary 2* (1999) 26: 2, 86.

<sup>15</sup> See David Chandler and Christian Fuchs, *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Virno, 'The Ambivalence of Disenchantment', 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>18</sup> For a longer treatment of resentment in global politics, see Elisabetta Brighi, 'The Globalisation of Resentment: Failure, Denial, and Violence in World Politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44: 3 (2016): 411-432, on which this section draws.

<sup>19</sup> See, most recently, Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2013), 315.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 69.

<sup>22</sup> Robert C.A. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origins of the Social Contract* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1990), 270.

<sup>23</sup> [Jean Améry, \*At The Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities\* \(New York: Schocken, 1980\).](#)

<sup>24</sup> Marc Ferro, *Resentment in History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (New York: Schocken, 1972 [1912]), 52.

<sup>26</sup> Wendy Brown, 'Wounded Attachments', *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 402.

<sup>27</sup> Rene Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

<sup>28</sup> William Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 213 and Connolly, 'A World of Becoming' in *Democracy and Pluralism: the Political Thought of William Connolly*, ed. Alan Finlayson (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010), 228-230.

<sup>29</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 57.

<sup>30</sup> Éric Fassin, *Populisme: Le Grand Ressentiment* (Paris: Les éditions Textuel, 2017); forthcoming in English as *Populism, Left and Right* (Prickly Paradigm Press).

<sup>31</sup> For a comprehensive philosophical introduction to Freud and his works, see Jonathan Lear, *Freud* (New York: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2015). Cfr. Joshua Foa Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 84-117.

<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII (1917-1919), trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 143.

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', in *The Freud Reader*, ed., Peter Gay (London: Vintage, 1995), 729.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 754.

<sup>35</sup> 'Man is a wolf to man', a proverb which Thomas Hobbes also used in his *De Cive* to illustrate the dangerous character of the 'state of nature'. Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p3.

<sup>36</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Totem and Taboo', in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (London: Penguin, 2005), 141-42.

<sup>37</sup> Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents', 750.

<sup>38</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Timely Reflections on War and Death', in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, 193-4.

<sup>39</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Why War?', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XXII (1932-1936), 199.

<sup>40</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* (London: Penguin, 2005), 203-18.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 205-206.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>43</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Left-Wing Melancholy', in *Selected Writings: 1927-1934*, vol. 2, part 2 (1931-1934), eds.

Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2005), 424.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 425.

<sup>45</sup> Wendy Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholy', *Boundary 2*, 26:3 (1999), 19-27.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>49</sup> Enzo Traverso, *Left-wing Melancholia: Marxism, History and Memory* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>51</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is there No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2008).

<sup>52</sup> See also, Mark Fisher, 'Exiting the Vampire Castle', *Open Democracy*, 24 November 2013, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/mark-fisher/exiting-vampire-castle> [last accessed 24 January 2019].

<sup>53</sup> For an obituary reflecting on Mark Fisher's suicide and the difference between pessimism and negative thought, see Adam Harper, 'Negativity, not pessimism! Remembering Mark Fisher (1968 – 2017)', *Open Democracy*, 16 January 2017, available at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/adam-harper/negativity-not-pessimism-remembering-mark-fisher-1968-2017>.

<sup>54</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights, 1988), 25-26.

<sup>55</sup> See Christian Borch, ed., *Imitation, Contagion, Suggestion: On Mimesis and Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>56</sup> Virno, 'The Ambivalence of Disenchantment', 32.