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# Sentiments of Resentment

## Desiring Others, Desiring Justice

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In his recent book, *Age of Anger*, Pankaj Mishra considers the uncoordinated bursts of violence that have punctuated the world since the fall of the Berlin Wall as tangible manifestations of the latest wave of crisis in liberal modernity. Rather than fostering peace and prosperity across the globe, he argues, the economic globalization of the last half century has created a claustrophobic and unequal world populated by frustrated individuals prone to anger and revenge. “The result is, as Hannah Arendt feared, ‘a tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else,’ or *resentment*, . . . an existential resentment of other people’s being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness.”<sup>1</sup> Resentment was recently defined as the dominant mood of our age. More and more often, according to commentators such as Marco Belpoliti, individuals feel a sense of animosity toward others, toward the world in general, that stems from a wrong, offense, affront, or frustration that the individual has or has perceived to have suffered.<sup>2</sup>

Beyond resentment, Peter Sloterdijk wrote of the recent return of another forgotten thymotic element, namely, rage.<sup>3</sup> After decades of suppression or

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attempted transcendence, the ongoing economic crisis and recrudescence of global terrorism have demonstrated the centrality of rage, as well as its potential role in revolutions and emancipatory political struggles. Martha Nussbaum has also agreed that anger has once again become not just ubiquitous but also “popular.” Yet she is much less convinced that negative emotions such as resentment and rage have a role to play in democratic politics—in fact, Nussbaum’s work is emblematic in stigmatizing these feelings as normatively problematic and politically pernicious.<sup>4</sup> Concerning resentment, in particular, Nussbaum argues that this sentiment is not only corrosive of human relationships, but detrimental, on a collective and political scale, to civic compassion and social order.<sup>5</sup>

Are we truly living in an age of resentment? And where does this negative emotion sit within René Girard’s mimetic theory? In this paper I argue, first, that resentment emerges as an important affect within mimetic theory, one intimately linked to Girard’s understanding of the triangular nature of desire and the perversely imitative dynamics sitting at its heart. Girard’s reading of resentment does indeed illuminate aspects of our global modern condition. However, I also argue that Girard’s conceptualization of resentment is somewhat narrow when it collapses resentment into *ressentiment*. In so doing, it not only obscures alternative generative mechanisms of resentment whose imitative import is limited, but it also negates the political value of resentment. Resentment not only can stem from highly mimetic forms of identifications, but can emerge as something *other than* the mere operations of envy and mimetic rivalry. Not all resentment, in other words, is about *ressentiment*. As I argue in the following, this matters not only in conceptual and theoretical terms, but also in political terms—the way in which one escapes or transcends resentment is different depending on whether this is a mimetic or anti-mimetic sentiment.

#### THE PLACE OF RESENTMENT IN MIMETIC THEORY

As an approach that grapples with the entanglements of desire, Réne Girard’s mimetic theory is deeply invested in affect and emotions, particularly those linked to the often conflictual and rivalrous nature of the mimetic condition. As Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Paul Dumouchel, and Jean-Michel Oughourlian have illustrated, envy and jealousy feature in Girard’s conceptual palimpsest only subtly and yet they arguably they form its ubiquitous affective underpinnings.<sup>6</sup> The same could be said about resentment. Rather than a purely psychological, individual disposition—and just like envy and jealousy—resentment is the

relational expression of a mode of desiring that is central to Girard's understanding of the mimetic condition. After a brief illustration of the place of resentment in Girard's triangular model of desire, this section investigates the equation of resentment and *ressentiment* that emerges from Girard's writings due to, on the one hand, the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler, and on the other Girard's own conservative inclinations. I argue that Girard deliberately conceptualizes only one route into resentment, and that is envy, which leads him to collapse the difference between resentment and *ressentiment*. This, however, eclipses other processes and forms of identification able to generate modalities of resentment that are *other than ressentiment*—the next section explains why this distinction matters.

The fundamental insight behind Girard's mimetic theory is that humans are mimetic animals, born with a fundamental openness and permeability to the Other. As imitative creatures, humans are driven by a tendency to imitation in many different ways and areas, but the most fundamental form of imitation is that which relates to desires, namely, what we want. Drawing on Jacques Lacan, Girard states that human beings are animals that desire, but do not know what to desire: "the reason is that he (sic) desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess." For this reason, individuals borrow their desires from the Other: Our desires, then, are always mediated by the Other. According to Girard, our subjectivity and autonomy, if one can still use terms that reveal themselves to be problematic under the mimetic magnifying lens, emerge only through a complex matrix of imitative dynamics of which we are often unaware. Further, while we learn what to desire from Others, certain "Others" are more important and formative than other "Others." To those "significant others," Girard gives the name of models: "We assume that desire is objective or subjective, but in reality it rests on a third party who gives value to the objects. The third party is usually the one who is closest, the neighbour."<sup>8</sup>

Rather than dyadic or monistic, according to Girard, therefore, the fundamental structure of human relationships is triangular—connecting subjects, models, and their mimetic object of desire in intimate ways. This triangular dynamic ends up complicating the neat relationship between self and Other considerably, to the point of nesting a huge potential for violence in every significant relationship. As Girard explains, "If individuals tend to desire what their neighbours possess, or to desire what their neighbours even simply desire, this means that rivalry exists at the very heart of human relations."<sup>9</sup> Love and admiration for our models can quickly turn into bitterness and rancor precisely because what they are, and what they desire, is necessarily also what we

want. "The positive feelings resulting from the first identification—imitation, admiration, veneration—are fated to change into negative sentiments: despair, guilt, resentment."<sup>10</sup> Imitation shows its rivalrous and conflictual side when it manifests itself in its acquisitive, appropriative incarnation—when it structurally sets individuals on a collision course over the same object over which their desires mimetically converge.

Two implications follow from this state of affairs. First, the genesis of violence in mimetic theory has nothing to do with scarcity, egoism, or self-affirmation, but it is merely processual. Violence is created by the mimetic entanglements of self and other: "violence is generated by this process, or rather violence is *the process itself* when two or more partners try to prevent one another from appropriating the object they all desire through physical or other means."<sup>11</sup> Second, from an affective point of view, the process of double mediation and rivalry taking place between self and model leaves both subjects experiencing a range of negative emotions, which escalate as the possibility of imitating/acquiring what the other is or has is thwarted. Resentment is the affect that dominates this particular phase of mimesis.

According to Girard, resentment is "what the imitator feels about his model when the model hinders his efforts to gain possession of the object on which they both converge."<sup>12</sup> As every attempt is frustrated and thwarted, the imitator quickly becomes obsessed not with the final object of desire, but rather with the model-turned-obstacle. Every time the imitator bumps against a model-turned-obstacle, however, the imitator's thirst for power and metaphysical desire to be, or fuse with, the model increase. These sentiments, defeated, bounce back as re-resentment. Resentment is thus the feeling most closely associated with the double bind of mimetic desire.

Whenever the disciple borrows from his (sic) model what he believes to be the "true" object, he tries to possess that truth by desiring precisely what this model desires. Whenever he sees himself closest to the supreme goal, he comes into violent conflict with a rival. By a mental shortcut that is both eminently logical and self-defeating, he convinces himself that the violence itself is the most distinctive attribute of this supreme goal!<sup>13</sup>

There is something both deeply ambivalent and masochistic about resentment. On the one hand, resentment attests to the inevitable coexistence of two "competing desires." A model that "shows his disciple the gate of paradise and forbids him (sic) to enter with one and the same gesture"<sup>14</sup> is inevitably one toward whom the disciple will feel resentful and ambivalent. Resentment is a

sign of love and hate for the same model—truly, an ambivalent state. Girard famously took issue with the Freudian category of ambivalence precisely because it was judged unable to show that this coexistence of opposites was *not* an individual pathology, but the necessary consequence of the workings of mimetic desire.<sup>15</sup> Resentment also condemns imitators to a form of masochism, or pseudo-masochism, in that “masochists cannot find their self-esteem except by a brilliant victory over the one who offended them,” which, however, never comes because of the power and status differential.<sup>16</sup> The imitator obsessed by his or her model, then, is “like a moth drawn to the flame that consumes it.”<sup>17</sup>

Throughout his work, Girard looked at a number of novelists and philosophers to disclose and dissect the features of resentment as a mimetic affect. Among the philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler stand out as his main reference points.<sup>18</sup> According to Girard, Nietzsche is not only the most important thinker of modernity but the philosopher who more than anyone else gave a definition and meaning to this affect—indeed, he gave it a name, and that name is *ressentiment*. In his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche writes of *ressentiment* as the affect of the weak, of the reactive, of the “slaves,” which he associates with Christianity. “*Ressentiment* is the interiorization of weakened vengeance” that “slaves” feel towards their “masters.”<sup>19</sup> *Ressentiment* is suspended, delayed, or botched revenge. As a frustrated, ossified, and ultimately generalized form of resentment, *ressentiment* plants itself in the psychic underground of the weak as a blunt arrow, kept in permanent tension by the pain or memory of humiliation, yet never released from the bow of desire. From there, it poisons the mind of those who suffer from it—like a wave on a rock, in a movement that blurs past and present, *ressentiment* recalls the injuries suffered; resentment, unconsummated and thus intensified, bounces back as *re-ssentiment*. However, if Nietzsche is the philosopher who gives *ressentiment* a name, Max Scheler is the author who according to Girard uncovers the origins of *ressentiment*. In Max Scheler’s reading of Nietzsche’s *ressentiment*, the source of this emotion is envy—the envy that derives from comparing oneself to a model, desiring what the model has or is, 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>20</sup>

Although Nietzsche and Scheler are correct in identifying the origins and workings of *ressentiment*, Girard considers them wrong in treating this emotion as an individual, anthropological characteristic of a certain class of people—a disease exclusive to the “slaves,” the weak and the powerless. Rather than an individual affect or a psychological trait, in Girard’s writings *ressentiment* is

conceptualized as a relational and mimetic passion.<sup>21</sup> What Nietzsche and Scheler do not understand, according to Girard, is that *ressentiment* is the consequence not of an ill will, but of how desire works. The fact that we imitate the desire of others makes us all ipso facto powerless and weak in relation to our models, whom we come to both admire and detest, even to the point where their resistance to our admiration turns us into spiteful and tormented beings. This is not an essential characteristic of certain people, but a modality of our mimetic, common human condition.

Further, although this modality is arguably trans-historical, it could be maintained that (late) modernity has made it particularly central to our society and way of life. As Stefano Tomelleri illustrates, “a genealogy of *ressentiment* informed by the mimetic studies of Girard concentrates its attention on the image of this emotion as a social configuration that arises from envy and is consolidated in modern democratic institutions, . . . where the equality that is proclaimed at the level of values contrasts with striking inequalities of power and access to material resources.”<sup>22</sup> Rivalry and envy, in other words, already normally present in human relations given their inevitably mimetic nature, seem to have escalated out of proportion in late modernity. The triumph of the very operating principles of liberal and capitalist societies—namely, equality and the market, and their competitive effects—is now amplified on a global scale. Further, immanence and the loss of any transcendental points of reference consign humanity to give up its normative horizons, and to live and fight its battles mimetically, which means violently. Both principles operate on, and multiply, the occasions for comparisons and envy. This is escalated by the fact that the promise of equality and wealth is frustrated by the reality of inequality and the structural imbalances that are often simply denied by society. As Girard himself states, “We live in a world where many people, rightly or wrongly, feel blocked, or paralyzed, in all aspirations, obstructed from achieving their most legitimate goals. Individual psychology inevitably ends up resenting this permanent frustration, and the need arises for a term that expresses this state of affair. . . . The word *ressentiment* seems designed to play this role.”<sup>23</sup>

However, at this stage it is worth pausing to question some of the conclusions that mimetic theorists reach regarding the relationship between desire, imitation and resentment. Are all our resentments merely expressions of *ressentiment*? Do our resentments always and necessarily stem from envy? And are our modern societies full of *ressentiment*, or of resentment, or both—and does it matter to be able to discern the difference between the two? In the next section I attempt to answer these questions and in so doing offer an alternative reading of the sentiment of resentment.

## RESENTMENT: AN ANTI-MIMETIC ACCOUNT

There is another story to tell about resentment. A tradition in modern Western political thought has given resentment a virtuous face when understood as a moral feeling that derives from the sense of being unfairly treated. In its positive incarnation, resentment has been understood as the guardian of justice.<sup>24</sup> As a moral emotion, 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. The eighteenth-century Presbyterian theologian Joseph Butler considered resentment as an indispensable social bond holding society together, a “weapon” whose function is to “to prevent and remedy . . . injury, and the miseries arising from it.”<sup>25</sup> Considering this sentiment in the context of other moral virtues, such as charity and compassion, Butler concluded that resentment is needed precisely to allow injustices to be acknowledged and injuries to be punished, rather than merely forgiven or forgotten. In some circumstances, therefore, resentment is morally superior even to charity.

Although acknowledging its potentially beastly character, unsocial nature, and violent potential, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* Adam Smith painted a similarly positive picture of resentment. According to Smith, resentment functions as a necessary corrective to imbalances in justice, and as the reparative mechanism that restores society to a state of harmony and fairness.<sup>26</sup> Once restrained and tempered of any of its excesses, resentment becomes that “noble and generous” feeling of indignation that inspires the sympathetic recognition of others, and transforms a community of strangers into a community of moral agents bound by the same *nomos*.

The contemporary political philosophy of scholars such as John Rawls, Jeffrie Murphy, Margaret Walker, and Robert Solomon follows on from these arguments, combining the insights from Adam Smith with a revived Aristotelian view of resentment and anger as morally justifiable and useful affects.<sup>27</sup> In *A Theory of Justice* John Rawls considers resentment as both different from and more important than anger, as a political and moral emotion. While anger can arise independently of situations of injustice, resentment always invokes a concept of right and the existence of a moral grievance. While we may feel indignation toward the wrongs we perceive to have been done to others, resentment concerns wrongs that we perceive as our own because they are directed at us.<sup>28</sup>

Further, Robert Solomon goes as far as to assert that, as “a passion for justice denied . . . , resentment lies at the heart of democracy.”<sup>29</sup> It is the emotional state that, more than any other sentiment, proves that we care about and are



“committed to certain moral standards, as regulative of social life.”<sup>30</sup> Distancing himself from the Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment*, Solomon argues that “what Nietzsche ignores, partly because of his own sense of biological determinism . . . is the legitimacy of the felt need to change the world. The sentiment of resentment may often be a legitimate sense of oppression. It is not the voice of mediocrity or incompetence but the passion for justice denied.”<sup>31</sup> What is judged to be detrimental if not wholly questionable, therefore, is thus not the place of resentment within the moral order—rather, it is the absence of resentment in the face of injustice that should be denounced as immoral. As Jean Améry stated, there is virtue in the moral “vertigo” of resentment that disrupts the moral order and prevents hasty attempts at reconciliation. It is only because of resentment that injustices become “a moral reality,” and it is only through resentment that an entire community, including perpetrators of injustice, is “swept into the truth.”<sup>32</sup>

In the context of the recent “affective turn” in social and political theory, an acknowledgment has gradually formed according to which, rather than being enemies of political causes, negative emotions play a fundamental role in politics. Thus, for instance, anger has been recently rediscovered as “the essential political emotion.” Drawing on the classical Aristotelian view of anger as useful and justifiable affect, a number of scholars have thus urged the reinstatement of its moral and political value. Similarly, scholars such as Michael Ure have demonstrated how resentment, rather than *ressentiment*, can function as “one of democracy’s emotional pillars” when it incorporates the democratic commitment to equal respect, with resentment being an important emotion for identifying and addressing collective and systematic injustices.<sup>33</sup>

William Connolly’s writings on the politics of resentment are also an interesting case in point. While Connolly acknowledges that resentment and moral indignation are “indispensable sources of energy and inspiration” for the formation of new political subjects and social movements, he warns about the exclusions and excesses spawned in the process. Identity politics, in particular, is also always potentially a politics of resentment, which deprecates, rages against, and ultimately punishes, difference.<sup>34</sup> For Connolly, however, *ressentiment* is altogether “another matter.”<sup>35</sup> Connolly, in particular, recognizes two routes into *ressentiment*. The first does rely on a Nietzschean reading of *ressentiment*, but the second route into *ressentiment* is moral and political—and highlights the transition, rather than the opposition, between resentment and *ressentiment*. “*Ressentiment* is stored resentment that has poisoned the soul and migrated to places where it is hidden and denied”<sup>36</sup>; “it can grow out of an accumulation of justified resentments” and can get dangerously congealed

and “encoded into the spirit of institutional life,” endangering pluralism.<sup>37</sup> Thus, not all forms of *ressentiment* are without political or moral bases.

The account of resentment that this literature presents is starkly different from the much less positive understanding of resentment to which many scholars, including Girard, subscribe. This is due to the hegemony exercised by the Nietzschean reading of resentment already illustrated in the preceding. Be that as it may, it is striking that Girard never engages in as thorough a discussion of resentment as he does of *ressentiment*. Girard focuses so much on the latter that the former does not figure at all as an emotion. What is missing, in other words, is an account of how legitimate grievances may emerge as something other than the mere operations of envy and mimetic rivalry, but as a result of wounding, injustices, and the *felt* need to remedy wrongs. The next section investigates why this is the case and why this matters.

#### WHAT'S IN A NAME—ON THE VALUE OF RESENTMENT AND THE PERILS OF *RESSENTIMENT*

As illustrated in the preceding, resentment is an ambiguous emotion. This ambiguity is well encapsulated in the slight literal variation that separates the two terms commonly used to refer to it: resentment and *ressentiment*. This emotion has been given both a virtuous face, when it indicates a legitimate response to a perceived injustice, and vicious features, when it is engorged with metaphysical envy and narcissistic rage. Interestingly, mimetic theory has tended to subsume or fold the former into the latter, discussing resentment predominantly, if not uniquely, as *ressentiment*. Other scholars and theorists have maintained the difference between the two, although some have also posited a continuum along which this emotion slides and morphs, changing features as it travels along. What's at stake in differentiating resentment and *ressentiment*? And what does this exercise tell us about mimetic theory as a social and political theory?

Girard understands resentment as being the consequence of mimesis. Given that our desires are always the desires of an Other, and given that both self and Other are stuck in this loop of imitation, we end up inevitably and necessarily envious of what the Other has or is. Envy makes us resentful and, as Girard states in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Max Scheler's notion of *ressentiment* describes this feelings most accurately.<sup>38</sup> Seen from the point of view of the literature reviewed in the preceding section, however, resentment seems to have nothing to do with envy. It is rather a moral emotion most frequently associated

with the perception of an injustice, the felt sense of having been wronged, or of some normative standard having been broken.

A closer inspection reveals that resentment and *ressentiment* presuppose different configurations of the entanglements between self and other. *Ressentiment* is a mimetic sentiment insofar as it starts by looking outside of oneself, by incessantly comparing oneself to the other during the encounter with the other, desiring and demanding identity. When the comparison leaves the subject wanting, suffering is interpreted as a proof of virtue, rather than of responsibility, of the imitator. Thus, blame falls on the Other and revenge becomes the only possible response. A new identity is formed, which will, however, be inevitably other-directed and bear the scars of its original exclusion. Resentment, on the other hand, is an anti-mimetic emotion insofar as it starts from self-affirmation and disidentification; it presupposes a clear sense of one's identity and worth, quite aside from whatever may be mobilized in the encounter with the other. The person who expresses his or her resentments names him- or herself and affirms his or her worth. Resentment starts from the acknowledgment of difference between self and other, and of a certain distance within the relation that caused injury or loss.<sup>39</sup>

Resentment and *ressentiment* also differ in terms of the kinds of behaviors they engender. *Ressentiment* tends to consign the subject experiencing it to a form of petty, or violent, backbiting—an alienating and non-emancipatory behavior that, as Gilles Deleuze argued, “decomposes resistance and incapacitates contestation.”<sup>40</sup> Since enjoyment comes more from the misfortunes of others than an increase in one's well-being, imposing one's suffering on others through revenge becomes a way of actualizing one's negative enjoyment.<sup>41</sup> Resentment, on the other hand, is unconcerned about relative gains or losses, as it is not caught in the mimetic tit-for-tat. Resentment aims at achieving adequate and emancipatory, that is, self-affirming, responses to injury that acknowledge one's responsibility in the relation but look beyond the horizon of the specific encounter toward a shared *nomos*.

Moreover, resentment and *ressentiment* yield different epistemic insights and “intelligence” about the wider political and social order in which they emerge.<sup>42</sup> *Ressentiment* presupposes and upholds a negative view of equality, which it interprets merely as an envy-inducing competition over status. This is, after all, the anti-democratic, elitist prejudice that moved both Scheler and Nietzsche to condemn the French Revolution as a product of *ressentiment*, among other things.<sup>43</sup> Only clear hierarchies and order, it is believed, can contain *ressentiment*, which otherwise, if left unchecked, is bound to lead to forms of violent reciprocity (to use Girard's terminology), including

scapegoating. Resentment, on the other hand, welcomes equality and is suspicious of imposed hierarchies because they are always already steeped in violence and inequality. Resentment takes democracy seriously by appealing to and reaffirming shared norms of justice. Interestingly, if one reads the particular climate of today against the different emotional lenses of *ressentiment* and resentment, different epistemic insights are allowed to emerge. While *ressentiment* would lead us to believe that today's widespread frustration and anger are due to envy and narcissism, or to a relentless search for recognition and status, reading the same material through resentment would allow us to see how the current wave of negative emotions has perhaps more to do with the way in which individuals have been failed by a number of global processes. As Zygmunt Bauman has so brilliantly illustrated, in today's world risk society, the individual condition is one of extreme vulnerability to the systemic failures of globalization, and yet one in which the individual bears full responsibility for their costs.<sup>44</sup> This necessarily creates the conditions for progressively alienated, frustrated, and resentful individuals—though this resentment can hardly be dismissed as *ressentiment*.<sup>45</sup>

Lastly, the value of these emotions seems to differ radically. In the literature influenced by the Nietzschean reading of resentment, *ressentiment* is viewed as a “bad,” counterproductive, and pernicious emotion that is patronizingly dismissed as belonging to “disempowered,” weak subjects—in the case of Nietzsche, Christians; in the case of Girard, the “puppets” of desire, namely, all human beings caught in endless mimetic entanglements. Paradoxically, this judgment has the effect of rendering the recognition of injustice more difficult, or precluding it altogether, not least because of the “bad” emotions that come attached to it. Resentment, on the other hand, holds a positive view both of human nature and of negative emotions. Resentment paints a landscape in which human beings are able to perceive wrongs as something other than the operations of envy—but also, it considers it possible to redress such wrongs by pursuing emancipatory strategies fueled by a perhaps uncomfortable yet useful emotion.

Given the differences between the two affects and the starkly juxtaposed moral universes these emotions sketch, it is inevitable in conclusion to ask the following question: Is the conflation of resentment and *ressentiment* in mimetic theory merely accidental? I do not think so. On the contrary, I would argue that rather than accidental, this conflation is entirely deliberate and that it is guided by a specific view of politics and human nature. Briefly put, the conflation of resentment and *ressentiment*, in Girard, functions as an argument against the value of *resentment*. The former is chosen over the latter because it ties in with the idea of a subject completely disempowered and at the mercy of desires that are

other-directed. In demonstrating the power of mimesis, however, Girard disempowers human beings.

First, within the horizon of mimetic theory, it is impossible to *feel* resentful without being drawn into the vortex of *ressentiment*. This precludes the possibility for human beings of consciously cultivating affirmative sentiments of resentment. How does one *feel* injustice in mimetic theory, if there is no name for it? While this may be a healthy warning against, inter alia, the naive aspects of the equality agenda, or the excesses of the politics of identity, it is a position that is manifestly reductive of the human experience. One only needs to think about the American civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King to understand how inappropriate and ideological it would be to apply the category of *ressentiment* here—and how central, on the other hand, “virtuous” forms of resentment were to its development and struggle. Second, the deliberate foregrounding of *ressentiment* over resentment has the aim of dismissing human beings as nonpolitical beings. Rather patronizingly, if not contemptuously, mimetic theory contemplates us only within the ever escalating squabbles of the petty, envy-generated tit-for-tat of *ressentiment*. The prejudice against any demands for justice, democracy, and equality, for which resentment can function as a vehicle, is certainly reminiscent of both Scheler’s and Nietzsche’s own conservative and anti-democratic outlook—with the only difference that Girard considers us as “slaves” to our desire, rather than to any specific religious tradition.

In fact, and in the last analysis, it is quite telling that of the two philosophers singled out for their treatment of *ressentiment*, Girard seems to give preference to Scheler’s account. As Wolfgang Palaver noted, “Of all the modern thinkers who offer reflections on the mimetic passions of vanity, pride, and envy, Girard focuses most extensively on Max Scheler.”<sup>46</sup> Interestingly, although raging against *ressentiment*, Nietzsche did recognize the moral value of resentment. According to Nietzsche, one can experience resentment outside an economy of pure envy by adopting active “ripostes” against the disempowering tendencies of *ressentiment*. As argued by Grace Hunt, laughter, gratitude, and even seeking revenge are healthy modalities of enacted resentment that Nietzsche contemplates as ways out of the repressed vengefulness leading to the spiral of *ressentiment*.<sup>47</sup> Far from indicating the collapse of life, Nietzsche’s resentment/*ressentiment* in fact points to the potentiality of a tremendous, life-generating energy source.<sup>48</sup> The emotion that Scheler describes, on the other hand, seems to be of a much more mundane kind—often gendered and ridiculed, petty, and static, Scheler’s treatment of *ressentiment* amounts to a polemic rather than a metaphysics, with little to no emancipatory potential. In embracing

this reductive notion of resentment, however, mimetic theory not only ties its cart to a deeply conservative vision of social order, but deprives us of the capacity to feel a broader spectrum of sentiments, while ultimately arguing against the possibility of cultivating and pursuing justice on earth, rather than surrendering it to a transcendental sphere.

## NOTES

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3. Peter Sloterdijk, *Rage and Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
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13. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 148.
14. René Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), 8.
15. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 169–91.
16. René Girard, *Resurrection from the Underground: Feodor Dostoevsky* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 14. See also, Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013), 129, and Scott Cowdell, *René Girard and Secular Modernity: Christ, Culture, and Crisis* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2013), 41–45.

17. Jean-Pierre Dupuy, "Anatomy of 9/11: Evil, Rationalism, and the Sacred," *SubStance* 37, no. 1 (2008): 40.
18. See Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, and Stefano Tomelleri, *Ressentiment: Reflections on Mimetic Desire and Society* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015).
19. René Girard, "Dionysus versus the Crucified," in *Modern Language Notes* 99 (1984): 825.
20. Max Scheler, *Ressentiment* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 52.
21. As Girard states, "Max Scheler himself is not far from the truth . . . But this intuition remains isolated. Only the great artists attribute to the mediator the position usurped by the object; only they reverse the commonly accepted hierarchy of desire." Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 14.
22. Tomelleri, *Ressentiment*, 72, 92.
23. René Girard, "Foreword," in Tomelleri, *Ressentiment*, ix–x.
24. The expression is Adam Smith's in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Knud Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 43. For recent reevaluations of this tradition, see Michael Ure, "Resentment/Ressentiment," *Constellations* 22, no. 4 (2015): 599–613; Didier Fassin, "On Resentment and *Ressentiment*: The Politics and Ethics of Moral Emotions," *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 3 (2013): 249–67; Thomas Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue: Jean Amery and the Refusal to Forgive* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008); Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, "The Dramas of Resentment," *Yale Review* 88, no. 3 (2000): 89–100; Aaron Ben-Ze'ev, "Are Envy, Anger, and Resentment Moral Emotions?" *Philosophical Explorations* 5, no. 2 (2002): 148–54; Grace Hunt, "Affirmative Reactions: In Defense of Resentment" (PhD diss., The New School, 2012); Rupert Brodersen, "Rage, Rancour and Revenge: Existentialist Motives in International Relations" (PhD diss., The London School of Economics, 2014), and Elisabetta Brighi, "The Globalisation of Resentment," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 44, no. 3 (2016): 411–32, on which this section draws.
25. Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel* (Cambridge: Hilliard & Brown, 1827 [1726]), viii, quoted in Fassin, "On Resentment and *Ressentiment*," 251–52.
26. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 41–47.
27. For a brief overview of this literature, see Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 10–11.
28. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 540.
29. Robert C. A. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origins of the Social Contract* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990), 270.
30. Richard Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 69.
31. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice*, 270.
32. Jean Amery, *At The Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (New York: Schocken, 1980), 70.
33. Ure, "Resentment/Ressentiment," 600.
34. William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 67. See also William E. Connolly,

*The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), and William E. Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

35. William Connolly, "A World of Becoming" in *Democracy and Pluralism: the Political Thought of William Connolly*, ed. Alan Finlayson (Milton Park: Routledge, 2010), 228.
36. Connolly, *The Ethos of Pluralization*, 213, emphasis added.
37. Connolly, "A World of Becoming," 228, 230.
38. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, 11–14.
39. For a detailed treatment of this difference, see Hunt, "Affirmative Reactions," 105–8.
40. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 57.
41. See Slavoj Žižek, *On Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 85–92, and especially the now famous tale of the Slovenian peasant afflicted by *ressentiment*: "The peasant is given a choice by a good witch . . . 'I will do to you whatever you want, but I warn you, I will do it to your neighbour twice!' The peasant, with a cunning smile, asks her: 'Take one of my eyes'"; 225n15.
42. Here I apply Martha Nussbaum's insights about the "intelligence of emotions" as developed in her *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
43. As evident in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), §94, and Scheler, *Ressentiment*, 29.
44. See, for instance, Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).
45. The fact that Girard offers no stringent criteria to distinguish between different sentiments of resentment is indicative of the limits of mimetic theory—or perhaps of his lack of interest in questions of justice. It is significant that whenever questions of justice emerge, the normally piercing insights of mimetic theory become blunted and vague, as if pervaded by a certain agnosticism or amnesia. One case in point is Tomelleri's book on *Ressentiment*. Although fully endorsing Girard's views of modern liberal democracy as a breeding ground for *ressentiment*, in the last section of his book Tomelleri admits that, however, there can be "real victims" and not just individuals engaged in "victim-playing." Yet Tomelleri concludes that the problem of distinguishing between the two can only be resolved on a "case-by-case basis." His admission that "injustices caused by inequalities . . . cannot be dismissed as mere *ressentiment*" combines with an unwillingness to give up the language of *ressentiment*—possibly in an attempt to transfigure it into forgiveness—to systematically negate the value of a different emotion altogether, that of resentment. See Tomelleri, *Ressentiment*, 99, 127.
46. Palaver, *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*, 109.
47. See, for instance, Grace Hunt, "Redeeming Resentment: Nietzsche's Affirmative Ripostes," *American Dialectic* 3, no. 2/3 (2013): 118–47.
48. M. J. Bowles, "The Practice of Meaning in Nietzsche and Wittgenstein," *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 26, no. 1 (2003): 14.



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