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Civil Disobedience, *Ressentiments*, and the Politics of Regression

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Abstract: At the very beginning of my talk, I shall introduce a crucial distinction between the terms “resentment” and “ressentiment.” We can take for granted that every protest action is accompanied by resentment, if we understand the latter with Peter Strawson as a negative reactive attitude to someone who is causing harm to oneself. However, “ressentiment” entails two additional semantic components, namely that the receiver of harm first suppresses her reaction to the offender and then redirects this reaction onto uninvolved collective others who become objects of her dehumanizing hate. Such objects might be immigrants, ethnic minorities, foreign nations, “global elites,” etc. In a next step, I shall share some thoughts on the social mechanisms and reasons for the development and spread of ressentiments, as well as on why and how those who are affected by them erect visible and invisible walls around themselves and so erode liberal democracies.

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Most of the people of my generation associate the term “civil disobedience” with a progressive emancipatory political action, for we experienced civil disobedience as morally justified resistance against the dictatorial regimes such as the communist one. Civil disobedience as radical but non-violent action was a very substantial part of the so called “velvet revolutions” in the late ‘80s, as well as of several other movements aiming at the democratization of society.

However, nowadays also (right-) populist, authoritarian, deeply anti-democratic political movements have widely adopted major forms of civil disobedience, such as the occupation of buildings and streets. One of the most prominent examples of this is the extreme right “Identitarian Movement” in Germany and Austria. This movement occupied in the last few years the public buildings like the Branderburger Gate, as well as headquarters and venues of left-wing and refugee-friendly organizations, in the name of its political goal to stop any form of immigration in order to achieve a homogeneity and ‘purity’ of the German (and Austrian) ethnos (cf. Goetz 2024; Deutschlandfunk 2024).

Generally speaking, civil disobedience is to be understood as deliberately breaking some legal norms and rules in the name of higher moral values that triggers correspondent moral feelings in the participants of the movement – feelings which motivate their action. That is why any civil disobedience needs moral justification and motivation – including the ones that are carried out by far-right, reactionary groups. My claim is that the civil disobedience, and the radical political protest of those groups in general, is grounded on a (quasi-)moral justification and motivation in the form of *ressentiments*. To be sure, *ressentiments* might play a motivational role also in radical democratic, progressive movements. However, their primary moral motivation and justification lies in the concept of *dignity*.

I shall elaborate on that crucial distinction between *ressentiment* and dignity as motivational sources for radical political protests in the last section of the paper. In the previous two sections I shall first reconstruct the major features of *ressentiment* in its difference to *resentment*. In the second section I shall then explain why political actions which are driven by *ressentiments* lead to individual and social regression.

***Ressentiment* vs. resentment**

Ressentiments as sources of motivation for social resistance have long been neglected in the political and social philosophy. As Rahel Jaeggi rightly points out, although the concept of *ressentiment* possesses a high public prominence, its “philosophical life” has so far remained

weakly contoured (Jaeggi 2023, p. 214). The strong psychologizing and individualizing tendencies of that concept appear problematic for political philosophers (Jaeggi 2022, p. 502). It is only in recent years that philosophical works on the political relevance of *ressentiments* have begun to appear. However, the majority of these, being written in English, reduce “ressentiment” to “resentment.” Only a few authors, like Robert A. Schneider and Anne Reichold, address the significant semantic differences between the two terms (cf. Schneider 2023, p. 5; p. 247f.; Reichold 2021, pp.166-171).

Philosophically oriented studies that discuss the role of *resentment* in political conflicts and struggles (e.g. Nussbaum 2016, Rostbøll 2023) spell it out as “anger” (cf. Nussbaum 2016, pp. 261–263). However, as Reichold rightly points out, this meaning of “resentment” is not identical to the semantics of “ressentiment,” as this term was first introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler. While according to Peter Strawson’s classic treatise on “Freedom and Resentment” the latter is to be understood as a negative reaction to the ill will or indifference of those who hurt or ignore us (Strawson 2008/ 1974, p. 7; p.15), *ressentiment* is characterized by the initial suppression of this reaction due to perceived powerlessness (cf. Reichold 2021, pp. 166f.). In a second step, the suppressed reaction is re-directed to persons or groups who are not responsible for the harm that triggers the reaction in the bearers of *ressentiment*. And finally, these bearers switch from the second-person attitude of resentment (“you”) to a third-person attitude (“they”), in which the mentioned persons or groups are ultimately reduced to *objects* of oppression and exclusion (Reichold 2021, pp. 168f.). Cynthia Fleury goes even one step further by claiming that the reduction of the addressees of *ressentiment* to things goes hand in hand with the self-reification of its subjects themselves (Fleury 2023, p. 18). Thus, *ressentiment* appears to be a profound psychopathological state of mind, which makes freedom and ultimately productive action by those affected impossible and which at the same time corrodes democratic coexistence (ibid., pp. 19–22).

However, the *social mechanisms* and the *political effects* of *ressentiments* are still far from being sufficiently clarified. The “founding fathers” of this concept, Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler, only trace some of these mechanisms and effects – and they often did so in a distorted and one-sided manner.

Nietzsche was the first to present as a central characteristic of *ressentiment* the stylization of others and strangers, of those who do not belong to one’s own community, as objects of hatred that serve as “lightning rods” for one’s own grievances (cf. Nietzsche 2016/1887, pp. 20–25). With Gabriel Marcel, it can also be argued that this construction of hate

objects in the form of alien groups (such as “the elites,” “the foreigners,” etc.) by *ressentiments* is characterized by the “spirit of abstraction.” This spirit consists in the addressees of *ressentiment* being constructed as abstractions without differentiations and individual features (cf. Marcel 1963, pp. 114–135).

It is well known that Nietzsche’s exposition of *ressentiment* articulates a clear and aggressively anti-democratic attitude. According to him, it is the desire for equality that leads to hatred and envy against the “superior” individuals who rise above the masses through their origin and character – hatred and envy which, precisely because they are suppressed and not lived out spontaneously, would solidify into a permanently directed attitude against those higher up (cf. Nietzsche 2016/1887, pp. 17–22). In his pivotal study on *ressentiment*, Scheler, like Nietzsche, localizes the emergence of *ressentiments* in modern, liberal democracy, but unlike Nietzsche he interprets the democratic roots of *ressentiment* in a descriptive rather than a pejorative way. According to Scheler, it is above all the discrepancy between the central democratic normative principle of the equality of all citizens and the actual massive material, social, and power-related inequalities between them that triggers *ressentiments* among the underprivileged. They take the form of a permanent attitude of hostility towards all those who the underprivileged perceive as superior, as members of elites – regardless of whether the latter are actually responsible for their own disadvantage or not (cf. Scheler 2017/ 1912, p. 9).

Current theorists of resentment, such as Reinhard Olschanski and Eva Illouz, however, rightly criticize Nietzsche and Scheler by noting that *ressentiments* arise in all directions – and not just from “bottom” to “top” (cf. Olschanski 2015, p. 17; Illouz 2023, p. 123). As Illouz shows, especially (but not only) using the example of Israel, *ressentiments* are primarily realized in the construction of foreign and hostile ethnic groups – and this construction is carried out also by the privileged social classes. It goes hand in hand with the ethnicization of one’s own social class, which is then imagined as a homogeneous collective that is consolidated around an authoritarian leader (see Illouz 2023, pp. 121–161).

***Ressentiment*-driven civil disobedience as regression**

The political effect of *ressentiments* is that those affected by them do not attribute to the hated others and to themselves a free will and individual features, but instead see the others and themselves, ultimately all society members, as nothing more than parts of antagonistic collectives. The function of civil disobedience here is to maintain and to make visible this antagonism and so to build up a hard-as-steel homogeneity of one’s own collective that blocks

any kind of individualistic attitudes of its members. This precludes any possibility of progressive politics, if we understand with Jaeggi innovative solutions for social problems and an opening up for new experiences under progress (see Jaeggi 2023, pp. 60–66; pp. 212f., pp. 232–234; Jaeggi 2022, pp. 519–522). On the contrary, *ressentiments* result in an obsession with hated groups like immigrants or “global elites,” which are blamed for all existing personal and social problems. Thus, the holders of *ressentiments* are not able to see other causes for these problems or imagine possible solutions for them except the deportation of immigrants and abolishing the supposed power of the “global elites.” This leads not only to a closure of horizons for innovative problem solutions, but also to a general impoverishment of the experience and the imagination of those affected by *ressentiments*. Their political and social thoughts become highly repetitive and restricted to a few clichés. There is not a better term for this state of mind than “regression.” And when folks of this mindset are about to dominate the political arena of a society, a social regression is taking place.

I would like to illustrate *ressentiment*-driven political action and thinking with the following example: In many European countries, among them Bulgaria, major objects of *ressentiment* are George Soros and the so-called “Soros-people” who presumably are sponsored, or use to be sponsored, in their education by the latter’s Open Society Foundation. Soros and “his people” are blamed for all real and imagined problems of the country – from corruption to a feared influx of immigrants and the alleged decline of the country’s “traditional values,” especially with regard to sexual morality. So, a Bulgarian friend of mine, who is actually quite liberal in his general political orientation, told me that the former pro-European Prime Minister of Bulgaria, Kiril Petkov, is not to be trusted, and that he is probably part of the networks of corruption, because he would be a Soros-person, having studied at Harvard. My friend didn’t know any further indications that Petkov was associated with Soros institutions; the singular fact that Petkov (who grew up in Canada and first studied there) spent some semesters at Harvard was enough for my friend to identify him with Soros and therefore to classify him as a corrupt politician.

It is worth noting that while Soros’ Open Society Foundation actively supported the process of democratization in the former communist countries back in the ’90s, for decades it has had only a marginal presence in Bulgaria, with very few and small projects, mainly social. Nevertheless, no one is currently the object of more and stronger *ressentiments* in the country than Soros and the “Soros-people.” The obsession with them blocks the ability of many society members to see the real causes for and actors of corruption and to search for ways to overcome it. One further effect of the *ressentiments* towards such a distinguished protagonist of the open

society like Soros is that these society members begin to stick to allegedly “traditional” Bulgarian values and rites and angrily to object to any kind of critique or problematization of them. In other words, those members of the society literally *regress* to a pre-modern state of mind and political action.

It is evident that the instrumentalization of *ressentiments* can be effectively used to politically mobilize large groups of people and to motivate them to radical actions. In fact, right-wing populist groups like the above-mentioned Identitarian Movement and many others not only instrumentalize, but also deliberately cultivate *ressentiments* that trigger civil disobedience. However, this is a civil disobedience which does not contribute to, but rather blocks, the solving of social problems and overcoming of crises, and which runs against the imaging of new, creative ways of organizing and conducting social life. And perhaps most importantly, the messages and slogans of these forms of civil disobedience offend the dignity of large groups of people, such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, or left-wing liberals. In most cases these messages and slogans even de-humanize the latter groups.

Dignity as motivational source of progressive civil disobedience

Not all political actors mobilize their followers for civil disobedience by instrumentalization and cultivation of *ressentiments*. Some of them declare the defense of human dignity as their overarching goal – and human dignity is exactly what is under attack by *ressentiments*.

This is particularly true for radical ecological and capitalism-critical movements like Last Generation and Extinction Rebellion that are fighting for radical measures against global warming by blocking streets, highways, and airports, as well as occupying factories that allegedly cause ecological damage. Thus, a central point of criticism in the programmatic declaration of the German Last Generation movement is that the climate crisis hits the people of the Global South the hardest and forces them to live under conditions which violate human rights (see <https://letztegeneration.org/en/erklaerung>). In a similar vein, the declaration of the principles of Extinction Rebellion states that every individual should be equally welcome and that power hierarchies that produce discrimination and marginalization of groups of people due to their ethnicity, gender, or class must be overcome (see <https://extinctionrebellion.de/wer-wir-sind/principles-and-values/principle-six>).

To violate human rights and to discriminate against particular groups of people – or even to de-humanize them as extreme right radical political movements do – means to act against the fundamental principle of human dignity. According to Joel Feinberg’s classical account of this principle, “dignity” means that every human being has rights which make her or him morally equal to everyone else, which enable her or his self-respect, as well as her or his claiming respect and esteem from others (Feinberg 1980, p. 151).

At the end of the day, institutionalized practices insulting human dignity are the main target of the civil disobedience of Last Generation and Extinction Rebellion. These are mainly – but not only – economic and political practices that cause global warming, which leads to destroying the conditions for a decent life for people who have already been disadvantaged. But practices of direct discrimination, oppression, and the exclusion of groups of people are also object of the protest actions of those movements.

These should be labelled *progressive* not only because they envision a more advanced, higher moral state of the social life of humankind, a state in which all individuals are equal in their fundamental right to live a dignified human life. They are progressive also in the light of the pragmatist (that is, experience-directed) conception of progress articulated in the works of Jaeggi quoted above. Respect for the perspectives of all concerned by urgent or controversial social and political issues and crises, and the subsequent consideration of these perspectives lead to searching for productive and innovative solutions for these issues and crises. This may initiate learning processes with regard to them which open up the possibility for new experiences.

Therefore, considering the perspectives of immigrants who left their countries of origin at least partly because climate change made a decent human life for them there impossible might increase the sensitivity for both the emergency and the global scale of climate change as well as for the moral obligation to accept this kind of immigrant. This might facilitate, on one hand, the search for global solutions for climate change, and on the other hand, looking for how to arrange institutionally a cohesive and fulfilling common social life among people with different ethnic origins, values, and biographical backgrounds – instead of simply rejecting migration and attempting to regress to an allegedly homogeneous and all-encompassing culture of the past. For example, in the area of school education, the bi- and plurilingualism of children of immigrant families can be used to enrich the teaching and the curricula in a way that could be profitable for all students: games of translating between different languages and students perceiving the learned information simultaneously from different perspectives that are

embodied in different lingual horizons could be used as a departing point for truly Socratic teaching and learning that fosters a process of *Bildung*, in the precise Humboldtian sense of that term at all students.¹ However, if one is obsessed with *ressentiments* against immigrants, one would not be able to imagine potential educational opportunities and benefits from immigration. Instead, one would blame it for an allegeable decline of the education in one's own society – and this would give her or him an additional “reason” for abolishing immigration.

Conclusion

Ressentiments are characterized by the initial oppression of one's reaction to felt harm and the subsequent re-direction of this reaction to groups of people who are not responsible for that harm. Thereby the addressees of *ressentiment* (for instance immigrants, “global elites,” etc.) are seen through a third-person attitude (“they”), which leads to their reification and, ultimately, de-humanization.

People who are obsessed with *ressentiments* see themselves and others not as individuals endowed with free will, but only as members of fixed, essentialistically understood antagonistic collectives. Here, politics is reduced to a fight between these collectives, and the cultivation of *ressentiments* is the best possible tool to mobilize large masses of people for that fight in the form of radical actions of civil disobedience (or even violence). However, this kind of politics blocks any possibilities for searching for productive and innovative solutions to social problems and crises, for learning processes, for making new experiences. In short, it is a politics of regression.

The exact opposite of that politics is the one declared and (at least partly) implemented by radical political movements which are motivated by a universalist understanding of human dignity and whose overarching goal is the defense of that dignity. By equally respecting the human rights of the members of different ethnic, cultural, and regional groups across the globe and equally considering the perspectives and experiences of these groups, movements such as Last Generation and Extinction Rebellion create a potential space for progressive politics, if under progress one understands the enrichment of collective experiences and learning processes, as well as an opening up of horizons for innovative solutions for social problems and crises.

¹ I developed the argument that the plurilingualism of children from immigrant families should be seen and institutionally treated as an educational resource in more detail in my book *Education against Populism?! On Antidemocratic Half-Education and Its Alternatives* (in German) (Stojanov 2022, pp. 16–18; p. 90)

To be sure, one might not agree with the practices of civil disobedience or with the concrete ecological or economic measures which Last Generation or Extinction Rebellion struggle for. But if one is endorsing the goal of social progress, one should see these movements as dialogic partners – maybe dialogic opponents – in the struggle for that goal. In this respect, he or she should treat them as radically different from extreme right, populist agents of civil disobedience.

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