

Objects of Political Desire X: Recognition over Resentment

Article by Rui Tavares

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Recent electoral outcomes in the Netherlands and Argentina have reignited the international debate on what the Left and progressives lack in terms of the far right's ability to mobilise voters. A common answer is that the extreme right has a much greater capacity to channel resentment. But if resentment confers such a great electoral advantage, shouldn't progressives also exploit it?

In progressive circles, if you come across an argument along the lines of "if we don't do x, the far right will", replace x with y or z and see if you can still stomach it, because soon you will be asked to do it.

I first encountered this line of reasoning about ten years ago, when Portugal was under a Troika-led austerity programme. If we don't bash the EU, said some progressive friends, the far right will do it. Soon there was indeed an emerging far right in the country but, contrary to predictions, it did not engage in Europhobic discourse; instead, it bashed us for being anti-EU and regressive.

No lessons were learnt. Later, in my country and elsewhere, I was taught sternly that if we don't champion nationalism, the far right will, if we don't argue against immigration, the far right will – and no doubt there will be more of this. The question is whether "progressives" will stop before embracing racism, anti-semitism, islamophobia, or even fascism.

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is its engine.*

This line of reasoning also applies to resentment. A recent article in the American magazine *The Nation* argues that "If the Left Doesn't Channel Populist Resentment, We Know Who Will". There have also been some high-profile attempts to use resentment as the core of new political projects emanating from the Left, notably in Germany with Sahra Wagenknecht's breaking away from Die Linke to found her own proto-party.

So we should consider not only the form of the argument, which is flawed, but also its substantive value: should we embrace resentment lest the extreme right monopolise it for its own gain?

Resentment is powerful stuff. Indeed, if fear is the fuel of reactionary discourse, resentment is its engine. Fear paralyses; unless it is expressed through resentment, it does not mobilise. Already in classical antiquity, Plutarch identified this two-step mechanism: "Shunt off the mind, and then do dreadful deeds". More intriguingly, Spinoza linked resentment to fear and hope, which are connected to expectations of future events that may or may not materialise. Resentment is both the result of unfulfilled or betrayed hopes and the fear of new hopes that may be dashed in the future.

Resentment has an obvious social context, linked to the denial of acceptance and the memory of humiliation past and future. To avoid it, people are told to act quickly and, if possible, first: choose a champion who will avenge you, and humiliate others before they humiliate you. This psychological mechanism makes political phenomena such as the shift from Obama voters to Trump easier to understand: to avoid the feeling of unfulfilled hopes again, you have to "own the libs" beforehand.

Resentment provides instant gratification and can be endlessly renewed. To resent is to repeat the memory of a bad emotion; you can always go back for more and find in yourself the strength to inflict on others the pain you're both feeling and trying to avoid. If you vote for someone who gives you hope, you'll have to wait years before your hopes are fulfilled, provided they are not betrayed in the meantime. If you vote for someone who promises revenge, all the people who had offered you hope without fulfilling their promises will immediately be crushed and feel what you feel now.

Since resentment is such an addictive and easily available drug, should we use it? The short answer is no. Resentment will make you feel bad, it will have diminishing returns, and soon you will need so much of it that you won't be able to move on or think of anything else.

There is no doubt that there is a lot to be outraged about. A lot of the things that are wrong in the world are not corrected because there are vested interests in not correcting them. Simply hoping that these injustices will melt away leads to disillusionment. Experiencing their effects leads to despair. But the proper progressive response to this state of affairs is not resentment but recognition.

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Just as resentment etymologically means "to feel again", recognition means "to know again", i.e. not only to be aware of something but not to ignore it. Recognition starts with recognising the other and its essential role for the free development of one's personality and sense of self-worth. In the 1990s there was an exchange between philosophers Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth on the relationship between redistribution and recognition. At the time, there was considerable pressure to abandon social democratic practices of redistribution and settle for simpler liberal standards of recognition and representation. But if the culture wars of the new millennium have taught us anything, it is that recognition is neither easy nor guaranteed. The struggle for recognition is the cornerstone that makes representation and redistribution possible.

So no, we should not do something because otherwise the far right will do it. It will probably do it anyway and much better than us. What we should do is that which, if it were not for us, would never be done. We need to start from recognition, through representation, to redistribution. The fact that the far right succeeds by channelling resentment doesn't mean that the Left, Greens, and progressives should do the same. There is no greater resentment than that towards dashed or betrayed hopes. If the Left abandons its values of generosity, solidarity, and optimism, this will be just another betrayed hope that will generate even more resentment – to its disadvantage.



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