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The Blaming Machine

By Manu Bazzano

Whenever I suppress my capacity for joy I feel annoyed by those who take pleasure in life. I think of them as shallow and greedy – a happy-go-lucky bunch of suckers who pay no heed to the depth of suffering in the world. Once I get going, I turn into a fully functioning expert in the crooked craft of mowing down those who ‘specialise in having fun’ – to quote the worst song lyric ever in the otherwise pristine poetry of Lizard King Jim Morrison.

I suspect I am not alone in this; strange things happen to those who repress joy and desire. Soon enough, we find ourselves straddling the high horse of resentment. In my case, I may come alarmingly close to calling on Jacques Lacan’s dubious notion of the ‘name-of-the-father’, pretending to subscribe to his essentialist praise of the Oedipal prohibition. I will waffle lyrical on its indisputable value as necessary obeisance of the law within the symbolic order; I’ll fall in with the even sillier idea that without Mum & Dad’s hetero double-act, kids won’t stand a chance in hell to grow up as reputable citizens and potential Tory voters. Some resenters will no doubt join the structuralist chorus that made some psychoanalysts in France argue against *homoparentalité* – gay parenthood.

Thankfully, I don’t resent happy people that often. Being resentful feels to me more like being briefly in the grip of a foul mood. In the end, joy (or *tragic* joy, to distinguish it from the moronic glee of oligarchs and plutocrats) always peers through those London clouds.

So far, so subjectivistic. But what happens if an entire society or culture is doggedly detained by a resentful mood? And what if this mood were the *foundation* of that society or culture? I

confess that I see this not as mere speculation, but as something which may approximate description (diagnosis?) of mainstream culture at this particular conjuncture. If so, then let me ask: What happens when the majority of people within society, stooped by guilt, hatred and fear, succeed in suppressing joy and desire in themselves? One possible answer is: the *spirit of revenge* takes over. Nietzsche, who loved French, called the spirit of revenge *ressentiment* (the two expressions are interchangeable). What is *ressentiment*? It is much more than mere ‘resentment’: to be animated by *ressentiment* is to nurture a stance of venomous denigration of life – to despise existence because it is found wanting, not ‘moral’ enough perhaps, not complying with one’s narrow and all-too-human notions of unity, direction and purpose.

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Normally it’s easy to discern the spirit of revenge at work. Take, for instance, hatred of difference. Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, contempt for the poor, the homeless, the exiles; fear of foreigners, strangers, and those who are different from ‘us’. Consider the case of envy towards those who give the impression to be flourishing or are fairly content with their lot, or seem to embody attributes we feel we lack. In these cases, the spirit of revenge represents a mean-minded state of being that wants others *not* to have what they have. It displays a sanctimonious worldview from which some of us feel authorised to apportion blame and dish out sanctions.

In all of the above, the workings of *reactive* forces are self-evident, given that these examples are to various degrees forms of

defensiveness, of re-action against something appearing to threaten our shaky notions of identity and its retinue of knick-knacks and discrete charms, of delusions and ruddy hallucinations: property, propriety, the laughable belief in self-possession and cognitive mastery. The popular, reactive version of identity now in vogue advertises a notion of an ‘autonomous’ self whose survival depends on a narrow set of uniformly servile choices: (a) become a consumer; (b) become a producer; (c) become a consumer/producer. No matter what we do, it ends up strengthening capitalism. What happened to the lofty promises of liberalism promoted by mainstream therapy culture (authenticity, independence and self-actualising in a safe environment)? They crumble miserably (with special effects and a cheesy soundtrack) under the pressure of a social apparatus dominated by the twin devils of competition and acceleration. Autonomy? Authenticity? In your dreams! This is growth totalitarianism, baby – the jovial diktat of acceleration.

The spirit of revenge is dominated by reactivity, and a genuinely critical theory and practice must be alert to whether active or reactive forces have taken hold of a particular entity – be it a person, an event, a political or cultural movement. An active force is affirming and liberating; it asserts and enjoys its difference. In contrast, a reactive force is merely utilitarian, adaptive; it rejects what the active force can do, turning it against itself. The consequences for us humans are disastrous: we become the laughing stock in the whole of creation, the only animals who turn against themselves in the name of a handful of silly ideas.

Sometimes it’s hard to spot the spirit of revenge at work. Rapid changes in cultural perceptions and values mean that it will take hold of a variety of political expressions, *including* those with ostensibly progressive agendas. Like everything else, language mutates and travels alongside societal and political shifts. Corporate institutions will adopt the lingo of anti-sexism, anti-racism and green-thinking while merrily

perpetuating sexism, racism and environmental pollution. Academic psychology may apply terms such as ‘the actualising tendency’ or ‘individuation’ while curtailing the very space where these ideas can breathe.

Then there is the case of privately run, self-governing organisations which may ostentatiously berate the patriarchy, but end up supporting it in other ways. What these associations tend to ignore is how closely associated the patriarchy is with a generalised politics of *protection* and *regulation*, and how ubiquitous these are in social policies. As Wendy Brown writes, it doesn’t matter whether we are contending with ‘the state, the Mafia, parents, pimps, police, or husbands, the heavy price of institutionalized protection is always a measure of dependence and agreement to abide by the protector’s rule’.¹ It is tempting to ask whether this feminist reading could be extended to professional bodies – say, in the world of therapy – which, for all the obeisance they exhibit to considerate, even feminist ethics (albeit watered-down to appease the Powers), are also prone to the very same patriarchal rule of thumb, founded on Rousseau’s notion of civil slavery masquerading as communal ethics: ‘I know that oppressed people do nothing but boast without pause about the peace and repose they enjoy in their chains’, he famously wrote – ‘and that they call the most miserable slavery “peace”’.² This is all the more disturbing when the protection afforded to the individual practitioner is next to nothing, something which may reveal the potentially fraudulent nature of the contract between the professional body and the practitioner.

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A more controversial instance of the above is the ‘#MeToo’ movement. It is vital and long-overdue that misogyny dating back centuries is fiercely opposed and stamped out. Yet the ‘poisonous solidarities’³ emerging over the last decade or so – between white mainstream feminism and the evangelical far-right, especially in the USA – give pause for thought.

In a recent book, Aya Gruber, professor of law at the University of Colorado, writes that when studying as a law student and looking at issues of sexual harassment and sexual crime, she was caught in a dilemma: on the one hand, knowing that ‘gender crimes reflected and reinforced women’s second-class status’, she felt these had to be actively pursued and dealt with. On the other, she was ‘involved in public defence and anti-incarceration work and had come to regard the prison as a primary site of violence, racism, and degradation in society’.⁴ It was after becoming a public defender that she ‘witnessed first-hand the prosecutorial machine’. She goes on to say:

I felt a sense of disillusionment that the feminist movement I so admired played such a distinctive role in broadening and legitimizing the unconscionable penal state. As an academic, I was increasingly concerned that women’s criminal law activism had not made prosecution and punishment more feminist. It had made feminism more prosecutorial and punishing.⁵

As other feminist writers who drew on the legacies of Angela Davis and Beth Richie have pointed out,⁶ this prosecutorial streak did not start with ‘#MeToo’ in 2017, but it did come to a crescendo around that time. Then as now, the assumption of what is often called ‘carceral feminism’ (from the Latin *carcer*, for jail) is that women’s safety can be ensured via state oppression and violence. What animates this kind of poisoned solidarity is *sex panic*, a particular form of fear which is rife both on the Left and the Right of political discourse. A sex panic is a social outbreak fuelled by the media, and typified by the fear of innocence being endangered, an innocence habitually attributed to white women and children. An outbreak of sex panic usually requires the presence of the bad man, the predator – a loitering, changeable, social presence, a threat against which the righteous citizens can mobilise.

The genealogy of this phenomenon is disturbing: it harks back to *The Birth of a Nation*, a 1915 film which glorifies racism and

the Ku-Klux Klan, and which invariably depicts the bad man as black. With every case of sex panic – including the priests scandal, the prurient interests in the alleged ‘free and wild sex’ going on in religious cults and the like – the same set of predictable reactions emerges: huge media coverage; a simplistic narrative of good against evil which cannot be discussed, let alone questioned; giving collective permission to indulge in the terrible glee of allocating blame – the very heart of *ressentiment*.

In her persuasive, impassioned and poetic book, JoAnn Wypijewski⁷ questions the omission of a critique of capitalism in mainstream feminist argument. She points out that in the USA, one in two black women love someone who is in jail; she questions the swift verdict with which too many different behaviours are shepherded into the ‘sexual abuse’ definition; and interrogates the glee with which Harvey Weinstein was described in the media and in the popular imagination: ‘deformed,’ ‘abnormal,’ ‘intersex,’ with no balls but a vagina, ‘disgusting’, ‘scarred’, ‘grunting’, with bumpy skin, lumpy semen, ‘fat’, ‘hairy’, stinking of ‘shit, sorry poop’, a beast, unmanned, sub-human, and so forth.

It would be wholly wrong to blame young activists and their sacrosanct anger for this upsurge of terrible enthusiasm, but Wypijewski doubts that in the victims’ rights movements, the sympathetic aspect of the victim may disguise the real purpose of the campaigns – namely, *to affirm retaliation as a social good*; a sure sign of the spirit of revenge at work.

Notes and References

- 1 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1995, p. 169.
- 2 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins and the Foundations of Inequality*, Create Space Publication, London, 2018, p. 56.
- 3 Roger Lancaster, *Sex Panic and the Punitive State*, University of California Press, Oakland, 2011.
- 4 Aya Gruber, *The Feminist War on Crime: The Unexpected Role of Women’s Liberation in Mass*

Incarceration, University of California Press, Oakland, 2020, p. 1.

5 Ibid.

6 Judith Levine & Erica R. Meiners, *The Feminist and the Sex Offender: Confronting Sexual Harm, Ending State Violence*. Verso, London and New York, 2020; JoAnn Wypijewski, *What We Don't Talk About: Sex and the Mess of Life*. Verso, London and New York, 2021; Maia Hibbett, 'Who keeps us Safe?' *The Baffler*, New York, September 2020, N. 53.

7 JoAnn Wypijewski, *What We Don't Talk About*, op. cit.

About the contributor



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SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“The best revenge is to be unlike him who performed the injury.”

Marcus Aurelius (121–180 AD)