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Power of Anger

Anger is the emotion preeminently serviceable for the display of power.
—Walter B. Cannon

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defined anger as “an impulse accompanied by pain, to a conspicuous revenge for a conspicuous slight directed without justification towards what concerns oneself or towards what concerns one’s friends.” This definition has laid the groundwork for how Western philosophers and psychologists have come to understand anger. Aristotle not only helps us understand what anger is, but, just as importantly, who can wield it. For him, those being wronged have the power to confidently lash out on those who are deserving. He recognizes power differentials in expression of anger, writing that “anger caused by the slight is felt towards people who are not justified in slighting us, and our inferiors are not thus justified.” Thus, baked into Aristotle’s conception of anger is a hierarchical ordering of the powerful over the powerless. Philosophers have also interpreted Aristotle’s conceptualization of anger to reflect an expression of status in that “according to Aristotle, one cannot react angrily to a slight on the part of a person with vastly more power than one’s own. Slaves, accordingly, are in no position to feel anger against their masters, but do have to know how to appease their masters’ anger, for example, by humbling themselves, confessing their fault, and not talking back” (Ben-Ze’ev 2003, p. 119). Walter B. Cannon, in his groundbreaking 1915 book, *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear, and Rage*, recognized one purpose of anger is to “display power.” Thus, in its earliest conception, anger was for the powerful (e.g., masters), and those underneath (e.g., slaves) were not privy to such a feeling. This begs the

question who is afforded the “right” to be angry today where the lines are not as clearly drawn between masters and slaves.

Our contention throughout this book is that some groups in a society can publicly express anger, whereas others are not because anger is reserved for the powerful. Consequently, we theorize that group-based social hierarchies in a society are maintained by instituting rules of who can express anger and who cannot.¹ We argue that United States race relations between Black Americans and white Americans exemplify this anger rule.

A clear example of Black Americans being emotionally disadvantaged is former President Barack Obama’s handling of the 2009 arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr. Before we delve into the details of the arrest, two important things are worth mentioning. First, at the time of the arrest, Barack Obama was the president of the United States, arguably the most powerful position a person can hold in the world. Second, he is a Black American. This raises the question, is a Black president of the United States afforded the “right” to be angry? If anger is reserved for the powerful, surely, he can be angry. But, he is also Black. Since Black Americans were brought to Virginia’s shores in 1619 against their will (Hannah-Jones 2021), they have been relegated to a position of inferiority. Being part of a group that occupies a lower position in American society might not afford Obama the ability to be angry. It presents a dilemma. Can a powerful Black person be angry?

On July 16, 2009, Barack Obama’s friend, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a renowned Black Harvard University professor, was arrested for allegedly breaking into his own home. When Obama was asked about the arrest at a news conference, he stated “I think it’s fair to say, number one, any of us would be pretty angry; number two, that the Cambridge police acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home.”² In a rare moment, Obama could not control his anger. As the acclaimed Black literary figure, James Baldwin put it, “to be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won’t destroy you” (Baldwin et al. 1961, p. 205).

¹ Throughout the manuscript, we use express and be angry to mean a person publicly expressing anger. Our theory applies to the public expression of anger and not people’s private feelings.

² “How One Scholar’s Arrest Tainted the President’s Image as a Racial Healer,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2016.

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Obama has been careful his entire political career not to let anger sabotage his aspirations by developing an emotional narrative of being calm and measured.

In fact, Obama believed a Black person voicing anger was politically unproductive. This belief is reflected in his memoir, *Dreams of My Father*, where he describes his interactions with white Americans stating “people were satisfied so long as you were courteous and smiled and made no sudden moves. Such a pleasant surprise to find a well-mannered young Black man who didn’t seem angry” (Obama 2007, p. 94). Obama’s thoughts suggest that Black Americans must downplay their anger to be accepted by white Americans in society. His concern about Black anger could also be seen in *The Audacity of Hope*, where he writes we should focus on minorities achievement and “not the anger and bitterness that parents of color have transmitted to their children” (Obama 2006, p. 249). His view of Black Americans curbing their anger remained up to his 2008 United States presidential run. In his infamous “A More Perfect Union” speech on race, he acknowledges the anger within the Black community by stating “that anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white coworkers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or beauty shop or around the kitchen table.” Despite recognizing Black anger’s existence, he criticizes its utility because shortly afterward, he states “Black anger often proved counterproductive.”

So how did the American public respond to Obama voicing anger about the arrest of Henry Louis Gates Jr.? Soon after his comments, he faced a strong backlash from law enforcement officials. For example, Sergeant Dennis O’Connor, the then president of the Cambridge Police Superior Officers Association, responded to Obama’s remarks at a news conference by stating “The facts of this case suggest that the president used the right adjective but directed it at the wrong party [person].” Moreover, a 2009 Pew Research Center poll showed Obama’s approval rating precipitously dropped from 61 percent in June to 54 percent in July, shortly after his comments on the Gates incident (Memmott 2009). The poll also showed that only 22 percent of white Americans approved of Obama’s handling of the Henry Louis Gates, Jr., situation.³ Because of these reactions, Obama ended up inviting Gates and the white arresting police officer over to the White House for what Obama referred to as a “beer summit.” Obama was reminded of a lesson he was all too familiar with – control

³ “Obama’s Ratings Slide across the Board: The Economy, Health Care Reform, and Gates Grease the Skids,” *Pew Research Center Report*, July 30, 2009.

your anger around white Americans, especially about the mistreatment of Black Americans – or face political consequences. As Aristotle and Cannon observed, anger is for the powerful: those who occupy a higher status in society. Clearly, in the earlier example, a Black person did not meet these requirements despite being the president of the United States.

The argument we will make in this book is that Barack Obama and Black Americans in general are aware of the anger feeling rule that Black politicians must navigate in electoral politics. The anger rule is that Black politicians must control their anger if they are to be successful among white voters. Should a Black political candidate express anger, especially about issues dealing with their racial group, we contend that they will face an electoral penalty among a large segment of the white population. This penalty should come from white Americans motivated to maintain a racial hierarchy. In other words, white Americans fueled by racism should be the staunchest opponents of a Black politician voicing anger. As we will argue later in this chapter, anger is a powerful instrument of social change, and white Americans determined to maintain the racial status quo will be most likely to oppose Black Americans having this emotional “right.”

We also contend that Black Americans are well aware of Black politicians’ emotional constraints in expressions of anger and therefore give them an emotional pass when running for an elected office in which white support is necessary. Turning a blind eye to the lack of anger from Black politicians is similar to the “wink and nod” agreement between Black Americans and Obama that Frederick Harris identifies in his book, *Price of the Ticket*. According to Harris (2012), Black Americans recognized that Obama must put the problems facing the Black community on the back burner in order to win over white voters. We contend a similar pass is being applied to him and other Black politicians in controlling their anger. Black Americans know that Black politicians must not fit the “angry Black stereotype” to have any success among a white electorate.

Black political leaders controlling their anger helps us understand why racial inequality in the United States has been sustained. We contend that this form of control has been historically done through demonizing Black anger. Throughout American history, supporters of slavery and racial segregation developed a narrative that Black Americans’ anger about their station in American society is detrimental and dangerous to white Americans. Since a substantial number of white Americans have accepted this negative emotional frame around Black anger, we argue that they have also tolerated and embraced the penalty for such an angry expression. Since being brought to Virginia’s shores, we argue that this anger

penalty toward Black Americans has taken many forms such as the brutality of slavery, lynching, mass incarceration, and denial of government assistance. Because of the cruelty of these penalties, Black Americans have had to acquiesce to this anger constraint not because they have accepted the angry narrative but for their own survival.

Our book examines another potential penalty Black Americans have endured for expressing anger: difficulty in winning statewide or national elected office. Specifically, we investigate whether angry Black politicians are penalized at the ballot box by a large number of white voters. We focus on Black Democratic politicians because most Black Americans run as Democrats.⁴ We also believe the object of this anger matters when white Americans enforce an anger penalty against Black politicians. What a Black politician is angry about signals that the object needs to change. It also indicates who is responsible for mistreatment be that an individual, group, or nation at large. Thus, an expression of anger calls for a change in the behavior of the party responsible for the mistreatment. Because of these factors, we believe the object of the anger is significant to where we will see an anger penalty surface. When a Black politician's anger questions or criticizes the treatment of Black Americans, directly or indirectly, this official will have a tougher chance of winning over white voters who harbor racial hostility. We do not think that any expression of anger will produce this penalty – only ones perceived as potentially altering the racial status quo. Thus, we think that a Black politician's expression of anger about the mistreatment of Black Americans as a group, directly or indirectly, is where the electoral penalty will surface.

We know from research that voters view Black political candidates as being more likely to favor their racial group over others than non-Black candidates are (Hajnal 2007). This perception of Black candidates often tends to racialize their candidacy. Black politicians seeking white support have tried to neutralize this racialization by presenting themselves as a deracialized candidate (Harris 2012; McCormick and Jones 1993; Ture and Hamilton 1967). Here, Black candidates avoid advocating issues that uniquely benefit Black Americans (e.g., affirmative action) and run on issues considered universal or as benefiting everyone. Stephens-Dougan, in her 2020 book, *Race to the Bottom*, argues that Black political candidates (i.e., Democrats) not only deracialize their campaigns but engage in

⁴ Another reason to focus on Democrats rather the Republicans is because the former's anger will be seen as challenging the existing racial inequality, whereas the latter's anger would be viewed as maintaining it.

what she refers to as “racial distancing.” Candidates use this strategy to convey a racially moderate or conservative message. By doing so, the goal is to appear as not disrupting the racial hierarchy among white Americans.

Another way Black politicians appear viable to white voters is constraining their anger about issues affecting their group. We argue that the policy does not need to uniquely target Black Americans but simply be implied to benefit the group. In other words, if a Black politician is angry about the criminal justice system or an economy not working for everyone, we believe the Black official will experience an anger penalty. Expressing anger about these issues is likely to be interpreted as changing the racial status quo. In fact, research shows that issues of crime (Gilliam and Iyengar 2000) and even government interference with the economy via spending (Valentino et al. 2002) are racialized in the minds of many white Americans. This means that Black politicians must constrain their anger when speaking not only about issues that directly affect Black Americans but also about issues that indirectly benefit their group. In American society, we believe there is simply little room for Black politicians to be angry. Meanwhile, we argue that white politicians do not face such constraints.

Our reading of American history suggests that white politicians (especially males) are afforded significantly more leeway in their use of anger. The past several presidential elections support this view. Rather than white politicians being concerned about being angry, the recent presidential elections of 2020 and 2016 showed them fully embracing it. For example, during the 2016 presidential election, Donald Trump considered himself the angry voice of America. At the Fox Business Network Republican primary debate in South Carolina, the moderator, Maria Bartiromo, asked the presidential candidate if “Republicans should resist the siren call of the angriest voices” (Hagen 2016). Trump responded by saying “I am very angry. Our country is being run horribly. I will gladly accept the mantle of anger.” The Republican presidential candidate was not alone in letting the country know his frustration. Bernie Sanders, the 2016 Democratic presidential candidate, also channeled this anger. Facing criticism from Bill Clinton that he seemed too frustrated, Sanders responded with “I am angry ... the American people are angry” (Stevenson 2016).

Although Trump and Sanders had different partisan affiliations, they were both riding a wave of anger brewing in the country. The 2009 Tea Party Movement, during Obama’s presidency, epitomized this rage. The party’s supporters were mainly livid white Americans who felt the country was changing for the worse (Banks 2014). And Obama, a Black man,

1.1 *Anger and Social Hierarchies*

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embodied this change (Parker and Barreto 2013). The changing complexion of the country drove most Tea Party candidates (largely white), seeking United States House and Senate seats, to simply run on anger. For example, Rand Paul, a Tea Party-backed and first-time Senate candidate, recognized a fuming electorate in his home state of Kentucky. Capitalizing on this anger, Paul angrily declared when speaking to supporters in Bowling Green “I have a message, a message from the Tea Party that is loud and clear and does not mince words: We have come to take our government back.”⁵ Paul’s angry rhetoric connected with Kentucky voters, propelling him to win the United States Senate seat with 56 percent of the vote.

Besides the rise of the Tea Party Movement, American history features other moments where white politicians seeking elected office were rewarded for their anger. Ronald Reagan was known for voicing his anger about the inefficiency of the federal government. Despite mostly being known for his charm and optimism, he also expressed a righteous anger for big government, which defined the conservative movement at the time. Elizabeth Drew of the *New Yorker*, speaking in 1976, claimed that Reagan’s appeal

has to do not with competence at governing but the emotion he evoked ... Reagan lets people get out their anger and frustration, their feeling of being misunderstood and mishandled by those who have run our government, their impatience with taxes and with the poor and the weak, their impulse to deal with the world’s troublemakers by employing the stratagem of a punch in the nose.⁶

As all of these examples show, white politicians do not feel the need to curb their anger. Meanwhile, Black politicians have been careful in how they emotionally present themselves by refraining from anger. If not, they will face an anger penalty. What is the motivation for some white Americans to enforce such a penalty toward Black office seekers? We turn to research in social psychology to understand how anger is important in maintaining social hierarchies.

1.1 ANGER AND SOCIAL HIERARCHIES

Group-based social hierarchies are often the results of economic surplus in a society (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Various psychological theories have

⁵ “Rand Paul Tapped in ‘Anger,’” *Politico*, May 18, 2010.

⁶ “What the Donald Shares with the Ronald,” *New York Magazine*, June 1, 2016.

been offered to understand how group-based hierarchies have been sustained. Some of this research has looked at people's motivations to maintain hierarchies such as ideology, racism, sexism, and classism (Marx and Engels 1848; Weber 1922; Allport 1954; Blumer 1955; Sidanius and Pratto 1999). Within these theories, people justify hierarchies based on how they see the world. For example, people who harbored racially prejudiced beliefs see racial minorities as underserving of government assistance. Therefore, their lower status in society is justified based on the perceived internal attributions of the group. For them, some groups (e.g., white Americans) are deserving of occupying a higher status, whereas others (e.g., Black Americans) are seen as justified in their lower position. Not only do some people consider higher-status groups as deserving more resources and rights than lower-status groups (Blumer 1955), some social psychologists have discovered that people believe they are also entitled to certain psychological privileges such as expressing anger (Tiedens et al. 2000).

According to the appraisal theory of emotion, anger occurs when a person is certain who is responsible for the offensive action. Thus, blame is external: it is outside of themselves. Moreover, an angry individual believes they have control over the outcome so their coping ability is bright and the desired outcome is within reach. The properties that go into experiencing anger helps us understand the type of outcomes that result. For example, people who are angry are more likely to make risk-seeking choices (Lerner and Keltner 2001), engage in heuristic processing (Tiedens and Linton 2001), double down on their priors (MacKuen et al. 2010), apply intergroup attitudes in opinions (Banks 2014), participate in politics (Mackie et al. 2000; Valentino et al. 2011; Groenendyk and Banks 2014), protest (Banks et al. 2019), punish criminals (Bang Petersen 2010), and support violent state policies (Kalmoe 2013). Therefore, anger is an empowering emotion where people believe they can change their circumstance by influencing the behavior of others. So, how does anger fit within social hierarchies?

A social psychologist, Larisa Tiedens, and her colleagues have devoted a substantial amount of attention to understanding how hierarchies operate in organizations. Tiedens has been specifically interested in the role of anger in these organizational structures and how this emotion signals the status of an individual. Her research supports the theoretical insights offered by Aristotle and Cannon: Anger is reserved for those on top of the hierarchy. Groups on top of the hierarchy consider themselves superior to those below. Their perceived superior position allows them to be less subject to blame for wrongdoing occurring in society.

When conflict erupts, people within a society expect that a higher-status group is afforded the right to be angry, whereas the lower-status group is expected to feel guilt or shame. Thus, the lower-status group is considered responsible for the wrongdoing.

Tiedens and her colleagues (2000) were interested in testing the existence of this relationship between emotions and group status. Specifically, they examined whether people attributed certain emotional reactions (e.g., angry) based on a person's perceived (e.g., high) status. They also wanted to know if the relationship is reciprocal: People infer status based on a person's emotional reaction. In one experiment, they randomly assigned respondents to one of two vignettes. One version of the vignette was about an advertising executive and his assistant heading to an important meeting to give a presentation. On their way to the meeting, they lose each other in traffic. The executive has the directions, whereas the assistant has the materials for the presentation. Since the assistant gets to the presentation late, they lose the account. In the other vignette, everything remains the same except the executive has the materials and the assistant has the directions. In this scenario, the executive arrives late to the meeting. After reading either vignette, respondents were asked how angry, sad, or guilty the executive and assistant felt. Across both versions, the executive was rated significantly angrier, whereas the assistant was considered to feel more sad and guilty. In another experiment, they use the same vignettes but excluded mentioning the status of the individuals (i.e., executive or assistant). Instead, they include information on one person as being angry, whereas the other is sad/guilty. After the vignette, respondents were asked who they believed – executive or assistant – was angry or sad/guilty. Respondents reported that the executive was the angry person, whereas the assistant was sad/guilty. A clear picture emerges from these findings – anger and status are intertwined.

The ability of anger to confer status and power is not only relegated to the workforce, but it also occurs in the space of politics. For example, Tiedens' research also demonstrates that angry politicians are considered as having more power and status than those who do not express this emotion. An angry expression enables others to follow one's lead because this feeling conveys strength and competence. A person who is angry believes that they have control over the outcome and can effectively alter it to their benefit (Smith and Ellsworth 1985). Along these lines, Tiedens (2001) examines whether people think an angry person deserves a higher status in politics. In one of her experimental studies, she examines how participants perceive President Bill Clinton's status

after the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The goal of the Clinton experiment was determining whether the president responding with anger about the Lewinsky allegations rather than sadness caused respondents to believe he should maintain his position and status. The experimental results show that participants thought Clinton should remain in power after voicing anger about the incident rather than sadness. She uncovers that this status conferral is driven by respondents believing that an angry politician is more competent than a sad one.

These studies powerfully demonstrate that people believe that anger is reserved for those in a position of power. We also know from research that expressions of anger by an individual can cause another person to concede his/her position (Sinaceur and Tiedens 2006). This concession is especially pronounced for those who have poor alternatives, such as low-status group members. All in all, this research helps us understand how inequality can be maintained by controlling who can be angry in a society. The reason anger is powerful is because it absolves a group from blame, it signals their higher position within a society, and it can lead others to concede their position. Thus, higher-status groups would want to restrict who has access to publicly expressing this emotion. If the goal is only for fellow group members to have the “right” to be angry, we contend that rules, norms, and beliefs must be instituted about this hierarchical structure of emotion. And research shows that people more easily learn hierarchical structures than those based on equality or simply differentiation (no rank order). They especially learn hierarchies that are familiar. For example, Zitek and Tiedens (2012) manipulated gender (male vs. female) and the organizational structure (hierarchy vs. non-hierarchy) in an experiment. They find that the respondents in the male hierarchy condition learned the structure easier than the other conditions. Given that hierarchies are easier to learn, especially familiar ones, we believe this helps us understand why a large number of Americans have readily accepted the anger advantage white Americans have over Black Americans. It is a familiar one that has been enforced by white Americans motivated to maintain a racial hierarchy. Black Americans have had little choice but to comply for their own survival.

Another important reason why some white Americans have acted to constrain Black political anger is its ability to mobilize fellow group members to act against injustice. Not only does anger convey which group is at the top of the food chain, but allowing expressions of anger also motivates a disadvantaged group to take action against those treating them unfairly. For example, scholars have found that anger causes people to support