Introduction

Sympathetic Resentment

The Indignation raised by Cruelty and Injustice, and the Desire of having it punished, which Persons unconcerned would feel, is by no means Malice.¹

Bishop Joseph Butler

On September 11, 1962, an obviously distressed Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote a letter to President John F. Kennedy. In it, he described the growing threat of violence faced by those African Americans in Albany, Georgia, who had been participating in a series of peaceful protests organized by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and who, until then, had been denied any federal assistance in their efforts. Dr. King urged the President to reconsider his position. “The hour has come,” he wrote,

for the executive branch of our government and the department of justice to become concerned agencies, and to transform investigating action into prosecuting action. I regret to inform you that I have learned from authentic sources that negroes are arming themselves in many quarters where this reign of terror is alive. I will continue to urge my people to be non-violent in the face of bitterest opposition but I fear my counsel will fall on deaf ears if the federal government does not take decisive action. If negroes are tempted to turn to retaliatory violence we shall see a dark night of rioting all over the South.²

King and the SCLC had faced fierce opposition from locals in Albany since they began registering African-American citizens to vote and working to

¹ Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons*, VIII.144.
establish civil rights protections nearly a year earlier. But the situation had become dire. The local resistance had inspired strong and especially unruly passions in the protesters. Even though King was unwavering in his commitment to nonviolence even if not especially in the face of violent retaliation by local authorities as the catalyst for social change, he understood that some “decisive action” from the President in the form of political recognition of the protests could be critical in bringing change about – and especially in preventing the “dark night” of retaliatory violence that threatened to erupt at any minute. King implored Kennedy to symbolically issue a second Emancipation Proclamation “to free all negroes from second class citizenship” and to “stand up for freedom.”

Without sufficient federal recognition that validated the struggles of the protesters, King worried that the passions in play all across the South, including in what would come to be known as the Albany Movement, might explode into violent clashes that could be politically destabilizing and catastrophic for the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement. Dr. King recognized the power of passions – anger and resentment, in particular – to motivate brutal acts of violence; at the same time, he believed in the righteousness and the promise of certain forms of political recognition to quell and channel such rage.

There is now general consensus among political theorists and social scientists alike that much of political motivation and mobilization can be explained by motives historically called the passions. Where disagreement emerges, however, is in identifying which passions matter.


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most and how – if at all – those passions might be refined to secure the best possible political outcomes. Which passions do (or should) influence political deliberation? Can free government survive (or thrive) amidst a citizenry more likely to vote with its heart than with its head? Or, rather, does modern liberal democracy require rational, independent judgment? Which individuals or groups stand to benefit or suffer most from passionate politics? Passions, with their oft-unclear political side-effects and murky relationship to free government, demand closer scrutiny from a theoretical perspective.

As the episode in Albany, Georgia, illustrates, chief among politically relevant passions is resentment, the focus of this book. It is hardly surprising that Western political and moral philosophers throughout the centuries have focused their attention on resentment, given how common and deeply felt it can be. “Indignation” (from the Latin root *indignari*, “to regard as unworthy”) was the term commonly used by these philosophers from antiquity to the modern era to describe the sense of anger human beings felt at being treated with disdain or contempt by perceived or actual superiors. Aristotle, for example, defended the claim that righteous indignation righteous (literally, “nemesis” in Greek) was an appropriate passionate response to certain events, and that its absence in those cases should be considered a moral deficiency. Nearly

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4. Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 2.7 1108b1–7. Aristotle calls the virtuous mean between the extremes of “envy and spitefulness” indignation, the exercise of which notably does not consist of abstaining from punishment or resentment but rather determining “to whom, how much, when, for the sake of what, and how” we should express our resentment or other emotions (Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 2.9 1109a27–29).
two millennia later, Thomas Hobbes expanded the scope of Aristotle’s definition by including “anger for great hurt done to another” in his conception of indignation – particularly when that “great hurt” was the result of an intended “injury.”7 And a little less than a century before the publication of Hobbes’s Leviathan, Michel de Montaigne introduced the term ressentiment to capture a person’s justified desire to retaliate against an injury done to them.8

Montaigne’s definition suggests one explanation for why resentment matters as much for our contemporary politics as it does for the history of political thought: ressentiment carries with it the double threat of repression and violent retaliation. In the Genealogy of Morals, Friedrich Nietzsche famously argued violence was such a natural outlet for resentment that when the weak could not express it, they would instead repress their resentment and reform their values entirely in light of it, establishing a “slave morality” that sought “imaginary revenge” in place of the violent revenge they were denied.9 When resentment is not repressed, it can often be a wellspring of further injury. We can easily think of crimes committed by individuals moved by personal resentment – whether colorful schemes for revenge, gory murders, or retaliation against even the most harmless perceived slights. Politically, resentment has had diverse and horrifying effects throughout human history as well. “Who can doubt,” the political theorist Michael Walzer wrote, “that Puritan repression, French revolutionary terror, Stalinist purges, and contemporary nationalist massacres and deportations were and are the work of passionately intense men and women – and their passions the worst ones: dogmatic certainty, anger, envy, resentment, bigotry, and hatred?”10 So, too, in contemporary American politics, are
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rural – and racial – resentment frequently cited as the primary causes of Trumpism and the recent resurgence of violent white supremacy.11 When human beings are left to pursue their various resentments, conflict apparently blossoms.

But nonviolence can be a direct outlet of resentment, too, especially when it is stirred by persistent injustice that those who feel it believe can be through peaceful means. In the Albany Movement, the overwhelming majority of African Americans, who had been perennially denied their Constitutional rights and repeatedly and violently oppressed, nevertheless remained steadfast in their commitment to the principles of nonviolent protest articulated by Dr. King and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) because they believed doing so was the most effective and morally justified means of rectifying injustice. Activists channeled their rage at more than a century of disenfranchisement and many centuries of racist terror toward the just cause of realizing civil equality through free assembly and protest; in this sense, the Civil Rights Movement is emblematic of the transformation of righteous resentment into peaceful political action. But the protesters’ nonviolent expression of resentment became as politically potent as it did because it made their resentment salient in a way with which observers outside of the Jim Crow South – especially supposedly liberal whites – could easily empathize. Nonviolent resistance aimed at enabling even the most disinterested observer to grapple with the blatant discrimination, disenfranchisement, and violence Blacks in the South suffered at the hands of their fellow citizens so that such an observer might support significant reform.

Fortunately, the experience of shared resentment is not limited to extraordinary political circumstances. In everyday life, we often instinctively take up the causes of friends and loved ones whom we believe to have suffered some unfairness or injustice. We might even recall moments when we defended friends or family members against unfair treatment without resorting to violence – by backing them up in an argument or by giving them positive aid – because we were angry or resentful on their behalf. When we elide resentment with violence, we obscure its practical and historical role in effecting positive change in both politics and our everyday affairs. Even more troubling, we foreclose

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a chief means to recognizing actual injustice, and we deny ourselves a powerful motive to rectify that injustice. It is not only both futile and insensitive to insist that others repress or ignore resentment but also likely to be the cause of further injustice. To prevent violence and rectify injustice, sympathetic recognition of the resentment of others should be central to any liberal theory of justice.

Of course, considering resentment driven by partial or familiar attachments brings another common concern associated with it to the fore: how do we know which resentments are justified and which are not? Does the resentment we feel on behalf of others always reinforce our tribal proclivities and personal biases? If we are solely trafficking individuals’ subjective feelings about injury when we make moral judgments, wouldn’t it be impossible to achieve any kind of objective standard of justice?

I think the account of spectatorial resentment that I develop in this book can address these problems. Although I never deny that we are instinctively more likely to adopt the resentments of those close to us, nor that such partialities are difficult to eliminate in moral and political judgment, I believe the account of spectatorial resentment that first Butler, then Hume, and finally Smith contribute to illustrates how we might differentiate between justifiable and unjustifiable resentments while avoiding relativism. Unreflective, first- and second-personal resentments are unlikely to ever be considered “proper” to any impartial observer. But resentment triggered by injustice – especially those injuries that demean or deny the equal status of others – should be the proper object of any impartial observer’s sympathy in a liberal society.

The connection between injustice and resentment in liberalism is not new. Throughout its tradition, liberal thinkers have recognized the deep connection between generosity and resentment at ingratitude, as well as resentment at injury more broadly. Although the term “liberalism” has a complex intellectual history (to put it mildly), I follow the twentieth-century political theorist Judith Shklar in finding commonality among all modern “liberal” political philosophies in their overriding aim “to secure the political conditions necessary for the exercise of personal freedom.”

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12 For a good overview, as well as a critique of the ahistorical use of term, see Duncan Bell, “What Is Liberalism?” Political Theory vol. 42, no. 3 (2014): 682–715.
For helpful discussion of liberalism’s long history, etymology, and its myriad meanings, see Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2018); I take an admittedly Anglo-centric approach to liberalism in this book, primarily because I am interested in showing how one strain of the Anglo-American liberal tradition, namely sympathetic or sentimental liberalism, provides an important intellectual defense of sympathy as a key means to secure the conditions for political freedom for all.

Adam Smith, TMS II.ii.1.9.


Though there are many varieties of sentimentalism, within moral philosophy the category is generally taken to include those theories that understand our moral anatomy to be comprised primarily of passions. For a definition and disambiguation of different types, see Michael Frazer, “Sentimentalism Without Relativism,” in *Passions and Emotions: NOMOS LIII*, ed. James Fleming (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 19–37.
sympathize with the resentment felt by victims of injury.\textsuperscript{18} Thus, Smith and his colleagues in the vanguard of modern liberalism – the main characters of this book – did more than defend a limited conception of justice based on active harm. Sympathetic liberals articulated why we should care about cruelty by employing Montaignean language to build upon the practical Hobbesian insight that we simply do care about the fate of others.

Critically, the sympathetic approval of victims’ resentment further entails the recognition that they are worthy of respect and rectification when injured. \textit{Spectatorial resentment}, as I will refer to the sympathetic and reflective adoption of indignation throughout this book, only occurs when a spectator considers a victim’s resentment to be \textit{proper} – something any impartial observer would approve of given the circumstances. Implicit in this moral judgment is the spectator’s recognition that the victim is due respect and rectification: when we approve of a victim’s resentment, we validate their indignation at being treated with contempt by their aggressor and we join them in seeking restitution. To paraphrase Peter Strawson, spectatorial resentment is a moral attitude that attributes agency to victims.\textsuperscript{19} Beyond attributing agency, the resentment we feel on behalf of victims also indicates our belief about their moral worth – specifically, that it is comparatively equal.\textsuperscript{20} We do not resent on behalf of those whom we believe to be far superior or far inferior to us; instead, we \textit{ridicule} or \textit{pity} them. We only sympathetically resent on behalf of those persons we consider worthy of but denied of respect (including ourselves), and thus those who we believe deserve restitution (as we would demand for ourselves if injured). The recognition of another person’s resentment therefore always entails an important moral judgment about their moral status.

I argue that spectatorial resentment similarly leads to the recognition of and support for the equal \textit{political} status of others. In other words, the equal


recognition implicit in spectatorial resentment has important normative political worth. Since liberals are – or should be – fundamentally concerned with ensuring that no one has the opportunity to exercise their freedom denied, spectatorial resentment holds enormous promise in helping us recognize and resolve disconnects between an individual’s or group’s equal moral status and their unequal political status. When we sympathize with others’ resentment and recognize their equal moral worth, we should also recognize their equal political right. If our resentment on others’ behalves entails a recognition of their equal status as persons, then there is no reason prima facie to deny them equal status politically. In fact, when we define justice negatively and demand restitution for wrongs done, sympathetic resentment naturally leads us to call for the political rectification of what we deem unjust. Spectatorial resentment thereby supports the important liberal commitment to equality before the law. Moreover, it beneficially focuses our attention on evidently vulnerable populations: victims of injury. It makes us alive to the injustices faced by the disadvantaged such that we both identify the failure to recognize the victim’s equal political status (to be free from undue injury) and call for restitution (through the recognition of right and support of proportionate punishment or political change). One great prospect of spectatorial resentment for liberal societies is that it can spur political action, often in the shape of reform, on behalf of historically marginalized or victimized communities.

Compare, for example, President Kennedy’s response to the Albany Movement with his very different reaction to the 1963 Birmingham campaign that eventually led to Dr. King’s arrest and publication of his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” Despite Dr. King’s warning of “retaliatory violence” in Albany, Kennedy never publicly recognized the protesters’ resentment by issuing the “second Emancipation Proclamation” that King and others hoped for.21 In the wake of the subsequent Birmingham campaign, however, Kennedy did issue a seminal report on civil rights, which employed some of King’s own rhetoric from the “Letter” to articulate the just basis of African Americans’ resentment and argue for political change. Kennedy framed the moral and political question before his fellow Americans in the following manner:

The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. If an American, because his skin is dark, cannot eat lunch

21 Martin Luther King, Jr., The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr, Vol. VII (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 47.
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in a restaurant open to the public, if he cannot send his children to the best public school available, if he cannot vote for the public officials who will represent him, if, in short, he cannot enjoy the full and free life which all of us want, then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? ... Those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence. Those who act boldly are recognizing right as well as reality.\textsuperscript{24}

Kennedy’s appeal was not simply a rational one about the moral hypocrisy of Jim Crow. His speech made an emotional appeal to the white electorate (those whom King identified as “white moderates” in his “Letter”) to sympathize with the plight of African Americans and to validate their claims to equal rights.\textsuperscript{23} In the speech, Kennedy consistently asks his listeners to put themselves in the shoes of those African Americans suffering under Jim Crow and to imagine what their own lives might be like under such circumstances. Throughout his appeal, he employs the language of “denial” to establish the failure to recognize the true equal worth of his African-American brethren. Kennedy deliberately and powerfully employs rhetoric designed to inflame sympathetic resentment among his audience that might encourage white citizens to recognize their fellows’ political equality.\textsuperscript{24}

A centerpiece of any liberalism truly committed to individual freedom for all should be the encouragement of such spectatorial resentment on behalf of the marginalized. The normative status of spectatorial resentment is not contingent on its effects either: whether or not resenting on others’ behalves actually brings about change, there is value in the recognition of others’ justified indignation. As Amia Srinivasan has persuasively argued, the absence of this recognition even leads to further “affective


\textsuperscript{22} King’s appeal was obviously not the first in the American tradition to try to move white moderates to recognize their moral hypocrisy. Perhaps one of the most eloquent nineteenth-century efforts to encourage white moderates to wrestle with moral hypocrisy can be found in Frederick Douglass’s 1852 speech, “What to a Slave Is the Fourth of July?” See Nicholas Buccola, The Essential Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2016), 50–71.

\textsuperscript{24} Of course, Kennedy’s speech came on the heels of his sending troops to the University of Alabama to assist in its integration, so his sincerity in the appeal might reasonably be questioned. Nevertheless, even if he were attempting to justify actions previously taken by his administration, doing so using the language of sympathetic resentment rather than of righteousness, which gave the victim’s experience and not the sympathizer’s ego validation, marked an important shift in his rhetoric.