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A Frommian perspective on the problem of anti-racist feminist resentment

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This paper was presented at the International Erich Fromm Doctoral Seminar which took place at end of September 2016, at the Erich Fromm Institute in Tuebingen (Germany). In it, I draw from my dissertation project, in which I identify certain impasses in anti-racist feminism in the North American context, and pose the question as to how these impasses might be transcended. I have organized this paper into two parts—the first part summarizes a segment of my dissertation in which I problematize the concept of *ressentiment* as it applies to anti-racist feminism. The second part discusses how I plan to use Fromm's work in an upcoming chapter as a means of giving insight into both the root of this problem and how we might overcome it. For this paper, I focus on the offerings of Fromm's humanistic psychological framework as he presents it in *The Sane Society*.

Before looking at how *ressentiment* manifests in the anti-racist feminist context, let us first discuss what is meant by "*ressentiment*." *Ressentiment* is a concept formulated by Friedrich Nietzsche, which captures what he sees as the psychological orientation of the weak toward the powerful. This orientation is characterized by feelings of anger, hatred, bitterness, envy, suspicion and a tendency to morally reproach those in positions of power. For Nietzsche it is a psychological orientation of those who are *constitutionally* weak and who compensate for

their lack of power (or "impotence") by morally elevating their suffering and victimhood while degrading displays of power and dominance as morally reprehensible (what he calls the "transvaluation of values").

In recent years, a number of feminists have identified *ressentimental* tendencies within feminist theory and practice. These feminists apply Nietzsche's concept *sociologically*, realizing weakness and strength to be historically variable categories of oppression and domination, rather than congenital ontological designations.

My research looks at *ressentiment* as it applies to tendencies and practices within anti-racist feminism. I choose to look at *ressentiment* within anti-racist feminism not because I believe that it is the only type of feminism or political movement afflicted by it, but because it is the movement with which I have the most familiarity and experience. Anti-racist feminism is an academic and activist movement that seeks liberation from the overlapping oppressions of racism and sexism. Like other emancipatory movements, anti-racist feminism recognizes that these oppressions are *structurally* produced and reproduced, rather than just based in individual or group prejudice.

Anti-racist analysis and practice developed as a response to traditional feminism, which treated woman as a universal category, ignoring the di-



verse experiences of women, as well as the interconnection between racism and sexism.

My interest in this project arises from my own experience within the movement. As an anti-racist feminist academic of many years, I had begun to feel a growing sense of ambivalence and unease. These feelings were tied to what I felt to be a contradiction, or dissonance between how we often acted, and our stated political goals. The dissonance was complexified by the fact that some of our common practices brought us a great sense of pleasure, and even powerfulness. Let me provide you with a description of one such practice to further explain what I mean:

A very common practice routinely used in the anti-racist feminist movement is that of "calling out." Calling out, as one activist describes it, "is a tactic to challenge privilege and bigotry in all their forms, within and outside activist circles to incite accountability. Calling out is a verbal or written retort to an organization or person that (at its best) isolates specific actions which are unacceptable and (in the very least) gets people to re-think what they meant and where they are coming from."¹ Calling out happens in a number of academic and activist settings – in scholarly papers, in classrooms and conferences, at activist meetings and protests, and in online forums.

To give you just one example of how an incident of calling out might proceed, let me share a recent exchange that I observed. A social media invite had been sent to a number of community activists for a dance party at a queer venue. The invite stated that all the music played that night would be by female hip-hop artists. One activist of colour wrote a post on this online event page asking if this event is being organized by black people, given that it would featuring music by mostly black artists. Another activist added to his question, asking if this would be yet another event in which non-

black people profit and benefit off of black culture in a cultural climate marked by the violent loss of black lives. These posts received 49 "likes" from other activists. When there was no immediate response from the organizers of the event, a third activist posted, asking that these concerns be addressed and that a gesture of support to black activism be given. The next day one of the organizers responded by saying that all the proceeds of the event would be given to Black Lives Matter Toronto – a current movement that struggles against police brutality against black men and women. This gesture was met with further challenges by activists who saw it as tokenistic and limited. The organizers, now visibly cornered, retorted that they would no longer be participating in this forum due to the toxic nature of internet "callout culture."

Indeed, the prevalence of this practice has led observers to refer to it as a "culture" among progressive activists and academics. What is missing from these descriptions is the psychological layer that lies beneath this seemingly political practice.

Calling out is an intensely emotional experience. It is almost always accompanied by anger, if not rage and hatred. It is a situation in which our oppression gives us a position of power and authority, and we use it to avenge not just the current injustice but also all the past injustices that we did not stand up to. There is a distinct sense of satisfaction that arises from being able to shame and silence the privileged person. Calling out is also a bonding event, in which other oppressed people can raise their voices in support of the reproach as well as vent their anger afterwards in a way that strengthens our ties and our sense of belonging to the group. Thus, while we may claim that we call people out in order to "incite accountability" and re-educate, I believe the psychological needs that calling out satisfies for us, largely trump any intention of offering truly constructive feedback to the offending party.

The similarity between these emotions that I have just named and the affective constellation

¹ Lynne Williams, "Activist Toolkit: Calling People Out" *Rabble.ca* <http://rabble.ca/toolkit/3-minute-action/calling-people-out>.



that Nietzsche calls *ressentiment* is significant. First, we see the presence of *anger*, a key aspect of Nietzsche's formula. Second, we see that it is a hateful and spiteful anger with *hate* and *spite* also figuring centrally in *ressentiment*. Third, we see calling out as reproach, as *blaming*. That is, we get a sense of, "I am oppressed/hurting /disenfranchised *because of you*". Fourth, we see a *transvaluation of values* whereby all that is associated with the powerful (their speech, comportment, ease of being, and other signs of their *privilege*) is devalued and debased as inherently *bad* while being oppressed affords us *moral superiority*, as well as *credibility*. That is, "I am oppressed and thus I *know* better and stand on the side of *truth* and *justice*." Fifth, we see the *vengeance* of *ressentiment* in the pleasure that comes from silencing and shaming.

Nietzsche's analysis unifies these disparate emotional symptoms to provide us with a psychological diagnosis from which we can forecast some political consequences. Before considering these, however, some problematics in Nietzsche's thought must be addressed.

Nietzsche's discussion of *ressentiment* is embedded within his analysis of "slave morality" and "master morality." As mentioned previously, Nietzsche sees both slave and master, weak and strong as constitutional designations. The slave is weak because he is born weak and for Nietzsche, his *ressentiment* is a destructive force that threatens the master class, which Nietzsche views as intrinsically superior (unsurprisingly, given his fascistic impulses). Nietzsche's prejudice against the slave prevents him from empathizing with the slave's plight and seeing *ressentiment* in anything but a reproachful light. To give voice to the pain of those who suffer, however, takes us deeper into the psyche of *ressentiment*.

The hatred, fear, exclusion, invisibility/hyper-visibility and mockery that one feels at the hands of the dominant group radically disturbs one's ability to form a consistent and affirmative subjectivity. These assaults can be explicit and violent or silent and subtle. No matter their

form, they invariably damage the psychic health of the recipient who is repeatedly told: *you are not good enough* and that *you don't belong here*. These feelings often then result in a pervading sense of *shame* and a sense of deep unworthiness. Indeed, I suggest that it is the pain of oppression that forms the primary emotional substratum, upon which *ressentiment* grows as a secondary affective configuration. The *ressentimental* emotions of anger, hatred, spite, suspicion and vengefulness lend the psyche a type of opacity that provides a protective distance from these more tender and vulnerable emotions. Surely it is not difficult to understand how an oppressed person might choose to live in the anger of racism and sexism, rather than the raw hurt and shame of them.

Recognizing the pain that lies underneath *ressentimental* behaviour does not, however, salvage it as an effective political strategy. As Nietzsche reminds us, *ressentiment* can only be a reactive orientation, incapable of producing affirmative possibilities for change. It is a psyche that is invested in its own pain and impotence, keeping it bound to the very conditions it purports to challenge. A *ressentimental* political movement is one that is anti-freedom, even as it claims freedom as its ultimate aim. As such, a diagnosis of *ressentiment* is a distinctly disturbing one.

Political theorist Wendy Brown further details the political consequences of *ressentiment* as it relates to feminism and other identity movements. The first is what she calls our "wounded attachments." Brown argues that a *ressentimental* feminism requires its pain, since it is on the basis of its suffering that it makes political demands. As Brown writes, feminism "enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future-for itself or others-that triumphs over this pain."²

Brown's second point questions feminism's

² Wendy Brown (1995) *States of injury: power and freedom in late modernity*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, p 74.



failure to not only challenge, but to also appeal to state and capitalist power. We encountered a symptom of this earlier when we discussed the concept of "privilege." We, as feminists, have a complicated relation to privilege as can be understood through the lens of *ressentiment*. On the one hand we reject all of that which represents privilege since, as we discussed, we see displays of power and dominance as morally reprehensible. On the other hand, however, "privilege" becomes the referent against which we pitch our demands. It is our exclusion from the offerings of privilege that fuels our movement by animating our claims to injustice. For example, we cite our exclusion from high-ranking university positions, influential posts in government and in the corporate sector as *proof* of racial and sexual inequality. As Brown suggests, in protesting our exclusions, we unwittingly reveal our desires-desires that reinstate a white, middle-class ideal and bourgeois capitalist values. As such, we reinscribe an exploitative economic system that is inherently incapable of offering us the equality and justice that we seek.

This leads us, along with Brown, to ask what has happened to the aim of liberation that anti-racist feminism and feminism in general supposedly stands behind? This is not a question that we ask alone. Indeed, a number of my fellow anti-racist feminist colleagues have confided that they also feel the limitations of our approach. And yet, both they and I continue to "call out" and engage in other *ressentimental* practices. Why do we do this? I have suggested that *ressentiment* hides the pain of racism and sexism that we feel. I have also discussed how the structure of our political approach requires that we need oppression in order to articulate ourselves politically – so that we need sexism and racism in order to be anti-racist feminists. But why do we need anti-racist feminism? Could there be a reason beyond the obvious and "official" answer of challenging existing structures of racism and sexism? A reason that allows us to understand why so many of us are attached to a *ressentimental* political project that many of us intuitively realize will not bring

us the freedom we claim we are seeking? To answer these questions I turn to the second part of my paper, which examines the work of Erich Fromm.

Fromm offers us a humanistic psychological framework that I believe can give us some insight into our current problem. According to Fromm all human beings suffer from the same problem of existence, and it is from this common predicament that we can understand our psychological needs. Fromm presents our existential situation in the following terms: "Self awareness, reason and imagination disrupt the 'harmony,' which characterizes animal existence. Their emergence has made man into an anomaly, into the freak of the universe. He is part of nature, subject to her physical laws and unable to change them, yet he transcends the rest of nature. He is set apart while being a part; he is homeless, yet chained to the home he shares with all creatures."³ In this state of limbo between nature and transcendence, we are pulled by two opposing impulses: the impulse to return back to nature, to remain in a childish state (essentially to "climb back into the womb") and the impulse to transcend, to grow, and individuate. This situation of existential doubt, anxiety, separateness, and opposing impulses produces five central needs that Fromm believes the satisfaction of which is at the root of all human strivings. I argue that we unwittingly use anti-racist feminism to help us satisfy these needs, although in a limited and ultimately "unproductive" manner. As Fromm contends, each of the needs he outlines can be satisfied in a productive or unproductive way.

So what are these needs and how does anti-racist feminism attempt to meet them? The first need is the need for relatedness. As social beings, our connection to others is necessary in order to overcome the anxiety of our separation. For Fromm, this connection can be facilitated either by sado-masochistic attachment or more productively, through love. In my view,

³ Erich Fromm (1955) *The Sane Society*, Fawcett Publications, p 30.



anti-racist feminism is a blending of these forms of connection. *Ressentiment* is an emotional field with both sadistic and masochistic elements. On the one hand, there is a great deal of pleasure derived from shaming and morally overpowering others. There is a tendency to reproach and humiliate. On the other hand, however, there is a masochistic investment in one's victimhood. As Nietzsche crudely describes, the weak are "dreadfully eager and inventive in discovering occasions for painful affects...they tear open their oldest wounds, they bleed from long healed scars."⁴

Beyond these unproductive forms of relatedness, however, there is love. In the moments that we disarm ourselves from the protection of *ressentiment*, we create deep bonds of compassion with one another. For many of us who have been dehumanized by gendered, racist, and indeed capitalist oppression, it is within the movement that our humanity is restored and that we feel seen and valued, and are given a place of belonging. This love has all the qualities of Fromm's productive definition: care, responsibility, respect, and knowledge of the other.

The second of Fromm's needs is that of transcendence. Our need to transcend comes from our urge to go beyond our situation as a "passive creature" who is born and who dies without consent, to an active "creator" of one's life. Here Fromm identifies creativity as the productive solution and destruction as the unproductive response. How might we understand this within the context of an anti-oppression movement? I regret to admit that our movement often nurtures destructive impulses over creative ones. Anti-racist feminism, like many other movements of our time, is focused on critique, or the discursive destruction of normative ideas and behaviours. There is furthermore a desire to destroy ties and erect a type of divisiveness between "us" (the oppressed) and "them" (the privileged). Indeed, as Fromm

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche (1989) *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Walter Kauffman and R. J. Hollingdale. New York: Vintage Books, p 127.

notes, destruction-even in this sense-can bring with it a sense of powerfulness and agency. While challenging oppressive power is a necessary step to overcoming it, a *ressentimental* fixation on reproach and invective prevents us from creating new affirmative possibilities and alternatives to our current world.

The third need is for rootedness. Rootedness emerges as a need as our severed ties to nature leave us with a frightening sense of homelessness. This need can be satisfied unproductively through incestuous ties to "blood and soil" such as through identification with race or nation; or it can be met productively through human solidarity-an experience of universal connection that transforms the world into a "truly human home."⁵ I would argue that anti-racist feminism offers a sense of rootedness through notions of race and gender that are reified in our struggle. Scholars like Adolph Reed have pointed to this contradiction in the anti-racist movement which, he argues, presents race as socially constructed, while patrolling the boundaries around racial membership.⁶ In speaking of ourselves (as we do in the North American context) as "people of colour" we articulate an in-group designation that provides us with a rootedness that presents others as outsiders, or in Fromm's language "strangers."

The fourth need is for identity. Fromm argues that this need is "so vital and imperative that man could not remain sane if he did not find some way of satisfying it."⁷ Anti-racist feminism, being just one of the many variations of what has been called "identity politics" is premised on the politicization of identity. One of the major critiques of identity politics is the way in which identity is essentialized, so as to erase differences within a group. This allows us to make demands as "women" or "as people of

⁵ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 61.

⁶ See Adolph Reed Jr (2015) "From Jenner to Dolezal: One Trans Good, the Other Not So Much" *Common Dreams*. <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2015/06/15/jenner-dolezal-one-trans-good-other-not-so-much>.

⁷ Ibid, p. 62.



colour." For Fromm, the sense of belonging that this type of conformity offers us is inferior to the "truly individual sense of identity" of the person who is "the center and active subject of his powers."⁸ Of course we might argue that we take on these identities as a political strategy. This does not take away, however, from the fact that we still derive an immense sense of security and stability from them.

Finally, Fromm describes our need for a frame of orientation, or a narrative to live by. This frame allows us a sense of security and meaning in an otherwise chaotic existential situation. As women of colour, we come from a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds that provide us with a picture of the world. Anti-racist feminism, however, adds another layer to this frame. Seen through the lens of *ressentiment*, the movement provides us with a distinct narrative of the world. In this narrative, we have the oppressors on the one hand (specifically heterosexual white men, and sometimes women), and the oppressed on the other (people of colour, and especially women and queer people of colour). There is no shared humanity between these groups, just a struggle for power. Despite the tragic depiction of this narrative, it does supply us with a sense of meaning, purpose and orientation even if it is not "in touch with reality by reason" – Fromm's requirement for a productive orientation. As I have suggested earlier, our framing of the world in terms of "us who are oppressed" vs "they who are privileged" prevents us from seeing how capitalism victimizes us all not just materially, but emotionally and spiritually as well.

What I have tried to illustrate through Fromm's humanistic psychological framework are the psychological needs that anti-racist feminism attempts to meet as a means of explaining why we cling to our movement, despite its *ressentimental* orientation. Indeed, it is often through our *ressentiment* that we are able to achieve these needs, although in a largely unproductive fashion. How might we re-direct our psychic

orientation so as to not only meet our psychological needs more productively but to also use this psychic energy to fuel a more emancipatory political struggle?

I believe we could begin by harnessing the love that already belongs to our movement. It may be true that it is because of our *ressentiment*—our sense of victimhood and common rage against our oppressors—that we as anti-racist feminists have come together. And surely, there are elements of *ressentiment* that we should keep. But as an affective configuration, I contend that that we much reach under its grasp in order to touch our pain and heal it collectively. Anti-racist feminist Dina Georgis discusses what it might be like for us to be "touched by our injury" rather than reacting to it in ways that keep us locked in cycles of revenge and hatred.⁹

Using the work of Judith Butler and others, Georgis explores the "transformative effects of loss" that become available to us once we "open ourselves up to being changed"—an opening that she believes is necessary to achieving transformative social change.¹⁰ Georgis provides the beginnings of a new philosophical framework based in recognizing the universality of suffering and loss, and our vulnerability to being hurt by one another.

Black feminist bell hooks has also been a leading advocate for healing the pain of internalized racism and moving toward a politics grounded in love. As hooks contends, anti-oppression struggles often focus more on anger and rage as mobilizing forces, rather than on internalized racism and self-determination. She cites the Black Lives Matter movement as one such struggle animated by rage, rather than focused on "PTSD, and the trauma of racism."¹¹ Hooks concedes that anger has its place in our strug-

⁸ Ibid, p. 63.

⁹ Dina Georgis (2008) "Moving Past Resentment: War and the State of Feminist Freedom". *TOPIA*. 20, pp. 109-127.

¹⁰ Georgis, p. 122.

¹¹ Quotes taken from a talk given by hooks at York University on October 22, 2015.



gle but argues that it will not bring an end to domination. For this, she maintains, we need love, for "to choose love is counter-hegemonic and revolutionary."¹²

I believe that this holding and witnessing of each other's pain, might allow us to amass a loving compassion that can restore our affirmative energies and provide us with the first step toward a psychological and political orientation capable of imagining an alternative future. Fromm's existential approach reminds us of our shared human situation—a timely reminder for all anti-oppression movements fractured along lines of identity. Fromm furthermore nourishes us with a radical vision that might re-awaken our *own* radical roots in order to help us realize that we need not fear the freedom to create an unknown world beyond our current neo-liberal capitalist configuration.

This paper has summarized what I view to be the problem of *ressentiment* in anti-racist feminism. I have suggested that while our *ressentimental* orientation forecloses our political aim of freedom, our resistance in overcoming it is due to a number of psychological needs it attempts to meet. Fromm's humanistic psychological framework allows us to understand our political strivings in terms of the emotional needs that they attempt to satisfy needs that are shared by all human beings due to our common existential predicament. In grasping these needs, we are able to see our current practices as a means to accessing a largely unproductive type of relatedness, mode of transcendence, sense of rootedness, identity, and frame of orientation. I argue, however, that anti-racist feminism contains the seed to overcoming these obstacles: *love*. As Fromm contends, "Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence."¹³

As anti-racist feminists, we are able to access this love in the moments that we expose ourselves from beneath our *ressentiment* and provide each other with the compassionate care

and recognition that we yearn for. I believe that a politics that foregrounds love as its motivating force can give us the resources with which to imagine alternative worlds beyond *ressentiment*. For as Fromm reminds us, "As long as we can think of other alternatives, we are not lost; as long as we can consult together and plan together, we can hope."¹⁴

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Erich Fromm (1995), *The Art of Loving*, p 104.

¹⁴ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, p. 315.