Michelle Schwarze, *Recognizing Resentment: Sympathy, Injustice, and Liberal Political Thought,* Cambridge University Press, New York 2020, pp. 178, € 101.54, ISBN 9781108478663

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As the politics of resentment becomes a ubiquitous framework for analysing contemporary social unrest, most discourses address it as a primarily harmful or destabilizing motive. Within this context, Michelle Schwarze's *Recognizing Resentment* represents a deliberate theoretical effort to reclaim resentment, not as an external threat, but as a constructive factor potentially embedded within the tradition of liberal political theory. By situating resentment among the works of early modern thinkers, Schwarze seeks to demonstrate that resentment as a passion for justice, which might be overlooked by other liberal theories, can and should be recognized as central to the liberal project.

The first chapter sets the stage by delineating the early modern dichotomy between reason and passion. Schwarze depicts a seventeenth-century intellectual landscape where reason reigned supreme, whereas passion was often regarded as problematic and troublesome. She emphasizes that even in such a context, passion remained central to political thought. On the one hand, thinkers such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and Grotius aimed to tame passion via reason or institutions; on the other hand, Pufendorf and Mandeville recognized that certain passions could contribute to sociality, even if they were still viewed as vicious.

Against this backdrop, Bishop Joseph Butler plays a pivotal role in Schwarze's narrative. In the second chapter, she treats Butler as the pioneer among English thinkers to rehabilitate resentment. Butler defines resentment as "settled anger", which he distinguishes from "hasty" or "sudden" anger (p. 54-55). According to this view, natural resentment is not only innocent and thus morally distinct from vice but also possesses an inherent moral goodness. In the latter case, the resentment that we feel on behalf of others, which Schwarze calls

"sympathetic resentment", serves as the primary motive for justice.

The third chapter turns its focus to Hume, who for Schwarze, could be regarded as a successor of Butler. She develops a unique exegesis of Hume's theory, defending that sympathetically felt resentment can help to constitute justice. It not only situates Hume within the tradition of recognizing resentment that she developed through the book, but also helps to solve the internal paradoxical problem within Hume scholarship, that is, "the need for justice" and "its weak or absent natural approval" (p. 67). Schwarze argues that this motivational dilemma could be solved by addressing sympathetic resentment, which is not the first-person resentment, but what we feel on behalf of others, as a motive. It is through this spectatorial lens that we recognize "another's relatively equal standing as a person worthy of justice" (p. 83). In this treatment, like Butler's distinction, Hume also distinguishes between "calm" and "violent" passion, warning against threats caused by partial resentment.

So far, Schwarze argues that resentment could motivate justice by recognizing the claims of victims of injustice, however, this remains primarily a spectatorial perspective. It remains a crucial question, then, how the resentful subjects, those who are injured, can deal with their own resentment? Schwarze tries to answer this question in the final chapter with an exegesis of Smith's theory. His account of spectatorial resentment is built on Butler's theory. From a non-partial third party's judgement, resentment that deserves recognition is differentiated from unreflective anger. Schwarze's focus on the victim's perspective in the final chapter remains confined to a pre-defined normative grid. Her framework assumes that for resentment to be recognized, the subject must first understand themselves as a victim of injustice within an egalitarian framework. Yet this overlooks those whose resentment stems from a total rejection of such a framework. There are subjects who may feel injured but refuse the liberal label of victimhood, or whose yearnings for non-liberal orders remain unaddressed. In this sense, recognizing resentment becomes a form of identity imposition. The resentful subject is granted a voice only if they agree to speak the language of the system that claims to recognize them.

Overall, it is fair to conclude that her theoretical effort is deeply rooted in liberal tradition. Taming resentment is a long existing tendency within it. For Schwarze, resentment "can and should motivate justice" for two reasons: first, it is a "strong motive for action that can effectively compete with self-love"; and second, resentment "entails victims' equal moral and political status" (p. 130). Both points are indeed valid within the book's internal logic. However, they rely on the presupposition that self-love and equal status are universally desirable or constructive, which is not always a matter of consensus.

Schwarze's attempt to reclaim resentment rests on a foundational presupposition: that the "justice" it motivates is inherently the liberal conception of equal moral status. However, in an era of deep polarization, the very definition of justice itself has become a site of contestation. When resentment stems from a yearning for a non-liberal order, such as traditional hierarchy or exclusionary identity, Schwarze's framework risks pathologizing these emotions as mere violent *ressentiment*. While the author mentioned Nietzsche at the very beginning of the book, Schwarze simply treats his account of *ressentiment* as a negative version of resentment which is related to the criticism of resentment that she aims to save it from, without situating it in Nietzschean tradition. Ultimately, her project appears like a normative disciplining of emotion in service of a specific political horizon.

Schwarze's reliance on these liberal presuppositions is not accidental; rather, it is a direct consequence of the specific vantage point adopted throughout the book. All these arguments originate from a third-person or superior perspective. When discussing how resentment supports "victims", the perspective provided in this book occupies a position that is clearly distinct from that of the victims themselves. This detached vantage point involves a moral distinction from which *ressentiment* typically grows. A framework based on the moralization of victimhood may prove to be ultimately unsustainable. If the recognition of suffering becomes the primary currency for political legitimacy, it inevitably triggers an endless competition for moral resources. In such a system, individuals are lured to position themselves as "more victimized" than others to gain standing. This dynamic suggests that a theory rooted in the redemption

of resentment does not resolve social conflict, but instead risks perpetuating a cycle of competitive victimhood. Turning back to the title, *Recognizing Resentment*, one must ask: who is doing the recognizing, and who is struggling for recognition? The framework that the book offers suggests a gaze from above, where resentment is granted legitimacy by an external authority. The resentful subject is therefore still subordinate to the system.

It is noticeable that the book was written in a context where resentment was frequently invoked to explain the driving forces of the 2016 presidential election. Now, a decade after that initial political shock, and as a similar outcome unfolded before our eyes in 2024, one must wonder whether the path offered by an egalitarian liberal theory can truly provide salvation for an even more polarized society. Perhaps a possible solution lies somewhere else, beyond this theoretical horizon altogether.