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The Age of the Sad Passions. An Introduction

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In 2003, Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit published *Les passions tristes*. At the beginning of the third millennium, their influential work interpreted the widespread sense of powerlessness, anger, and fear as increasingly dominant. At the intersection of psychic suffering and social crisis, the essay by the two psychiatrists captured the shadow cast on our societies, just two years after the attack on the Twin Towers, on a world still largely shaped by globalization. What the volume efficaciously revealed was that the breakdown of teleological historicism and the loss of hope in a kind of scientific messianism, which had once fueled a steadfast confidence in the time ahead, was now making way for a new consolidated distrust in the future; once conceived as a source of hope, the time to come was now being seen only as a threat.

As the two authors maintained, our societies, driven by competition and alienation, tended to exacerbate feelings of helplessness and frustration, and created a fertile ground for the proliferation of the "sad passions." The terminology, indeed, was of Spinozian origin, and, in fact, we owe this expression to Spinoza together with the bulk of his philosophical legacy which has so impressively influenced and altogether informed the contemporary cultural theory in academia.

Baruch Spinoza introduced the term "sad passions" in his *Ethics* (1677). For the Dutch philosopher, human affects can either increase or decrease our ability to live and thrive. Sad passions, such as fear, hatred, envy and resentment, are negative emotions that weaken our ability to take action and prosper and to develop a positive intercourse with other people., Even at the risk of endangering our self preservation and vital impulse, or *conatus*, these affects imprison us in cycles of passivity and misanthropy, drastically compromising our power of agency.

If Spinoza first articulated, in a phase of incipient modernity, the notion of the sad passions as affects that weaken our power of action, it was Friedrich Nietzsche, at the apex of Positivism, who rediscovered and expanded this concept in *The Genealogy of Morality* (1887). He argued that *ressentiment* arises from a profound sense of powerlessness, where suppressed desires and unfulfilled ambitions are transformed into moral judgments and reactive hatred towards the other. In his existential and philosophical system, this inversion of values, where he typically saw weakness as glorified and strength as vilified, created a toxic emotional atmosphere.

Gilles Deleuze, interpreting both Spinoza and Nietzsche, sharpened this critique. Reconfiguring the traditional contrast between reason and emotion, the French philosopher introduced instead a new opposition between joyful and, once again, sad passions. While the former were conceived as increasing our capacity to think and freely behave (Spinozian *conatus*), the latter tended to diminish and frustrate any positive relational attitude, resulting intrinsically tied to impotence. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1983), and *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* (1988), Deleuze emphasized how these affects signal a reduction in our capacity to fully live and creatively interact, reinforcing submission to oppressive forces rather than enabling resistance or transformation.

This insight has also informed the recent "affective turn"; in cultural theory, the speculative attitude that seeks to analyze how emotions shape social life and political structures. Investigating the entangled dimensions of the aesthetic, the ethical, and the political, intellectuals and critics have adopted the assumption (resonant again with Spinozian inflections) that passions shape what bodies can do, improving or damaging the power of their action. Sara Ahmed, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) for

example, concentrated on showing how fear, hatred, and anxiety, circulating within public spaces, often reinforce social hierarchies and exclusionary practices. She sustained that, in dealing with other than conscious drives, the relevant question is not what emotions are, but rather what they can do, repeatedly demonstrating how certain negative affects can provoke a contraction of positive agency.

Indeed, already in the aftermath of World War II, Hannah Arendt, in her reflections in "Karl Jaspers citizen of the world?" (1957) had addressed similar phenomena in her concept of "negative solidarity". She observed how modern societies often unite not through common goals but through shared feelings of resentment and dread, leading to destructive political and social alliances. This fearful and frightened solidarity, largely inspired by new threatening military technologies, deepened the collective sense of defenselessness and apprehension. The result was a paralyzing emotive scenario dominated by angst, and the rise of exclusionary and violent communities, those that in more recent times, in his *Liquid Fear* (2006), Zygmunt Bauman was to term "communities of fear."

The intensification of contemporary global threats—environmental disasters, epidemics, terrorism, wars, and migration crises have led also Pankaj Mishra in his influential *The Age of Anger* (2017) to bring these themes to the forefront in his analysis of global discontent. Mishra captured the global scale of these dynamics, tracing how these emotions, born from widespread feelings of dispossession and humiliation, feed into the rise of populist movements and violent political rhetoric, particularly online. In exploring how the sad passions have become a defining feature of our time, he analyzes the spread of *ressentiment* through social media, where anger and hatred thrive in a digital landscape that amplifies and accelerates negative feelings.

Indeed, Spinoza couldn't have predicted that new technologies would be invented, then generating and massively circulating the sad passions. As huge scholarly attention has been devoted to investigating these last years, the rise of *hate speech*, particularly online, signals an escalation in negative affects, once private and now spilling over into public discourse. In particular, hate speech demonstrates how easily the language of populists or supremacists is effectual in exploiting people's passions in order to construct enemies that must be feared and contrasted. With unprecedented speed and reach, the sad passions are by now fostering decentralized yet relentless forms of collective blaming, shaming and scapegoating.

Navigating this genealogy, this issue of *de genere* explores our present age of *ressentiment*, in which the sad passions seem to dominate the public sphere, affecting not only our emotional but also our political lives. This issue constitutes one of the outcomes of an interdisciplinary research conducted for three years at the University of Naples L' Orientale which culminated in a public scientific meeting in November 2023. The international conference was titled *Negative Solidarities. The age of anger and hate speech in the Anglophone globalized public sphere* and convened scholars of a wide disciplinary range to reflect on the causes and consequences of these affects. The speakers interrogated the literary, artistic and cultural representations of the age of anger and resentment, as well as their articulations in political discourse and in social media communication. With the purpose of exploring the local manifestations of a transnational phenomenon, a number of panels were arranged following geo-political contextualization, focusing on three major Anglophone areas. This collection of articles is now in part reproposing that original articulation of perspectives addressing respectively the US, the South Asian area, and Europe.

The issue opens with a reflection on the context of United States and its – in many ways – paradigmatic articulations of anger and hate. The spectacularizing of politics and the increasing "Truman Show" effect of social-media narratives, coupled with the constitutive racialization of American society make it a particularly interesting and pressing stage to analyze under the lens of "the age of anger" and the often violent development of negative solidarities.

In his article, Vincenzo Bavaro asks a crucial and perhaps preliminary question: what are the limits of free speech? When and how is it necessary to regulate speech in the public sphere, and, in the specific case of the US, when and how does or should the Supreme Court intervene? Analyzing some cases and Court decisions, Bavaro poses issues not only of what can "morally" be considered acceptable or inacceptable speech, but also – and more cogently for our reflections – of what language does, both when it is used to articulate hate, and when it becomes the legal means that regulates and constructs the bonds of a given community. These issues are highly relevant in the US, where free speech is considered a pillar of its libertarian imprint, but are also clearly fundamental questions that become even more urgent in the age of social media and the complex layering of local legislations and supranational cyberspace, accelerated circulation of words, images, real and unreal narratives.

The blurred line between real and unreal – the "post-truth" era we are quite fully living in – is undoubtedly embodied by Donald Trump. The phenomenon of Trump, but more interestingly of Trumpism, is the focus of Brad Bullock's analysis. Trumpism, as a dominant cultural narrative, "will survive Trump" (Bullock, 30) and this is perhaps the most imperative aspect to attend to; the spectacular, surreal and often and unreal/reality-show character of Trump may risk obfuscating "the climate of ideas" (Mishra 2017) that has by now consolidated in the US – and, increasingly, elsewhere. It is, certainly, a climate of resentment and hate, but also, as Bullock points out, of "hate tolerance", one of Trump's staples, through which hate towards individuals or groups is not necessarily explicitly stated, but inferred, thus legitimizing the hate speech of others, and ushering it in, in a way. Donald Trump's personal "inclination" to lying is no secret; it is, in fact, integral both to his persona and his political strategy. Tony Schwartz, ghostwriter of Donald Trump's 1986 memoir, *The Art of the Deal*, recounts: "he routinely lied as easily as he breathed, [...] and without a hint of a guilty conscience" (Schwartz 2024, n.p.). This is, evidently, not just a personal issue that may more or less impinge on the credibility of a statesperson. It has *de facto* officialized the "nihilistic relativism" that Hannah Arendt warned about already in 1951 in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in relation to authoritarianism. Brad Bullock's look into Trumpism rightly includes the new avenues and languages of social media – including Trump's notoriously exorbitant and unsupervised use of Twitter (now X) – to reflect upon such a pivotal moment in US history as the 2024 presidential elections, and the national narratives construed for and through these elections.

Remaining within the context of the United States, Marta Cariello looks specifically at the way hate speech and hate crimes against Arab Americans shaped the post-9/11 culture of resentment, stemming from deeper roots within a much older, foundational discourse of racialized social order and practices of othering embedded in the fabric itself of the US. The response from the Arab American community has come in many forms, negotiating and decolonizing the layers and complexity inside a composite identity – as Arabs of many different descents, and also as Muslims, Christians, women, queer, or any

other intersectional identity and identification – and also performing practices of artistic response and reclaiming voices and narratives.

With Esterino Adami's contribution, the focus shifts geographically to the Southern Asian region, and specifically to the Indian context. Adami looks into the discursive construction of "the enemy" in the news media context, through the combination of critical stylistics, postcolonial criticism and media studies. Three case studies, drawing on different social and cultural positionings of the subjects involved, offer a "window" into the strategic use of affective language to foster hate and exclusion. The multicultural, multi-religious and deeply stratified context of the Indian nation constitutes an extremely interesting framework for the study of the varied articulations of hate and othering discourses, especially in this particular moment of nationalistic rhetoric, coupled with the unmediated proliferation of social media interactions.

The two articles that follow both focus on literary works set in Pakistan, or in a British-Pakistani context. Daniela Vitolo analyses Faiqa Mansab's *This House of Clay and Water* through the lens of resentment and hate in the face of non-conforming subjects that challenge societal norms. The protagonists of the novel are two women and a hijra, all in different ways the object of discrimination and construed as "other". These characters are depicted by Mansab as oppressed but also as resisting "the limitations and pressures placed on them by a system which creates the conditions for the domination of sad passions" (Vitolo, 73). The complexities of agency and identity are also brought to the fore, with each of the three protagonists negotiating their social positions through sometimes unequivocal oppositional tensions, and other times more ambiguous affective transactions with the relentless logics of exclusion, whether it be based on gender, class, or other social categories. Giuseppe De Riso delves into the works of Pakistani British author Mohsin Hamid, looking at the way magical realism is used by the author to convey nostalgia as a tension between the resentment toward a troubled present and the desire for an "ideal" past/future. The theme of nostalgia is very interestingly tied in with the economic inequalities of capitalist society, and a consequent longing for the return to an idealised past, which, in turn, comes to be seen as the future that may hold a better life. Frustration then lies in the present, a time that can only harbor the resentment of not being as good as the past, or the future. However, De Riso underlines how Hamid's work explores not only the restorative aspect of nostalgia, but also its "reflective" character, which, following Svetlana Boym's definition, "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (Boym 2001, 13), and therefore "accepts" in a way the ambivalence of the present without seeking to reproduce the past. Hamid construes different "nostalgic" characters in the three novels De Riso analyses, offering a nuanced and layered picture of nostalgia as source of discord and resentment, but also, especially through magical realism, of a space (and time) to escape "the centrifugal forces of the spiral of restorative nostalgia" (De Riso, 95).

The two articles closing the issue take us to broader interrogations into the "climate of ideas" of contemporary hate and anger, starting with an exploration into the relation between negative solidarities and censorship. Anna Maria Cimitile's contribution looks at censorship – in particular of books, but also in the form of "art-hating" – as the enactment of hate and anger, both on the individual and on the collective level. Cimitile offers an excursus into different incidents of book burning in different moments in history, and in different geo-cultural spaces, as well other forms of censorship befalling literary works. The analysis then turns to acts of destruction of works of art, which,

though not necessarily provoked by deliberate or conscious hate against the specific piece of art, or sometimes even art in general, bring forth the question of art (in all its forms) as destroyable, exposed by its very nature, and therefore vulnerable. Most importantly, however, Cimitile underlines the way literature and art resist censorship and destruction, responding and re-mediating through their very existence and insistence against or even in proximity with hate and its passions.

We close the issue looking into not-so-distant futures and the political relevance of imagination. Rossella Ciocca explores the relationship between speculative fiction and the notion of the sad passions through the study of Russell T. Davies's experiment in social science fiction, *Years and Years*. The mini-series, set in post-Brexit Britain and following the life and crises of one family and – simultaneously – of an increasingly dystopic nation, becomes itself a theoretical reflection on indifference and intolerance, and, ultimately, on the collapse of modern democracies. Ciocca analyses three scenarios set forth by the mini-series: the technological, the political, and the ethical one. On these different but intersecting planes, the narrative inevitably leads to "the fall of the protagonists into their respective and collective nightmares [as] reminder of our age of negative solidarities nurtured by the prevalence of the sad passions." (Ciocca, 125). Here, speculative fiction holds its power to generate theory, to pose questions and hypothesize answers, with the uncanny force of recognizable frames of reference, such as, for example, an extremely timely (future?) second Trump presidency. Ciocca's reflections take *Years and Years* into a wider theoretical analysis of the sad passions, and our age of anger. The future, our speculations, are never detached from the present time; the collapse we might imagine is likely happening under our very eyes, not just on screen.

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