Political Affect: The Drama of Ressentiment  
Lecturer: Dr. Sjoerd van Tuinen

Course description

Why do people vote against their economic self-interest? What is the connection between Brexit and Trump? What motivates a lone shooter? Why do people throw themselves in the arms of authoritarian leaders like lemmings into the abyss? The rise of populism, cynicism, fanaticism and fundamentalism challenges us to reconsider the problem of ressentiment, a toxic brew of hatred, frustration, humiliation, indignation and passivity. Whereas its conceptualization dates back to the nineteenth century and has gradually dissolved in the course of twentieth century emancipatory processes, the concept of ressentiment is now making a comeback in political discourse.

The aims of this module are to explore the genealogy of this concept, to interpret the shifting political stakes that are expressed in it, and to evaluate the consistency and coherence with which it is currently put to use in public and academic discourse. We begin with a comparison of the concepts of resentment and ressentiment, relying on texts by Scottish enlighteners such as Joseph Butler and Adam Smith and comparing them to the texts on the untranslatable ressentiment (French word, German concept) one century later by Soren Kierkegaard, Fiodor Dostoievski, and Gustave Flaubert. We then proceed from a detailed reading of various texts by Nietzsche to a systematic mapping of the different ways and political contexts in which the concept has been reinvented in the humanities and the social sciences since. We study sources from philosophical anthropology, political theory, literary history, and anthropology, and rely on a diversity of philosophical methods such as psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, critical theory, and phenomenology. As we will see, ressentiment is one of those thorny issues that constantly threaten to compromise the one who speaks about it. There is no intrinsic good sense or evidency in the application of its concept and no universal criterion, but only a polemical sense. This means that the plausibility of the diagnosis of ressentiment, the real efficacy of its discursive ‘truth’, must be proven in another way than in the dialectical form of a truth judgment. It cannot be abstracted from a political drama in which it takes on a different meaning depending on who uses it. Yet even if there is no a priori rule and no final argument that can mediate or solve this drama, there is nonetheless a systematicity to be explored in it.

Lecture/seminar 2x per week 2 hours

Learning targets:
- To acquire a solid grasp of the philosophical history of the concepts of resentment and ressentiment
- To be able to recognize the different political stakes in the use of the concept of ressentiment in both public and academic discourse
- To recognize and use various diverging and sometimes mutually contradicting theorizations of ressentiment from the humanities and the social sciences
- To analyze the affective infrastructure of neoliberal democracies with a focus on the reactive attitudes

Examination:
- Each student is expected to attend class regularly, to have completed the readings prior to class, to participate in class discussions, and to engage with the news regularly to make an inventory of cases to compare and work with. You can compensate for missing a class with a 500 words critical reading response that includes a pointed
reconstruction of the main arguments in the mandatory literature within 3 days after class.

- In addition, you will give a presentation and write a research paper of 3,000 words in which you analyze arguments and discuss ressentiment in at least two theoretical (literary, socio-political, existential, psychological, cultural, ...) and two actual contexts. In your presentation, please make use of at least one of the recommended sources. Your final mark is based on your research paper.

Guide to success in this course:

1) Do the reading
2) Come to class
3) Be prepared to participate in class discussions
4) Do not rely on a yellow highlighter pen. You should get in the habit of taking notes on everything you read, including the required texts.
5) Read critically and comparatively. Note down questions on the readings that you would like to raise during class, and think critically about the authors’ sources and arguments. Take into account the year and place of the publications.
6) Try to read some of the books on the syllabus in their entirety.
7) Follow up areas of interest by reading other sources besides the required texts, such as the titles mentioned under ‘recommended literature’. Check footnotes and bibliographies in the main texts for further, specialized sources in your particular area of interest.

There are several decent handbooks to Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morality. As general secondary literature to our theme, I recommend the following volumes:

- Jeanne Riou / Mary Gallagher (eds., 2016), Re-thinking Ressentiment. On the Limits of Criticism and the Limits of its Critics, Transkript Verlag.

And videos:
Together with my colleague in Anthropology from Heidelberg/FU Berlin, Dr. Jürgen Schaflechner, and with the financial support of the Princeton Institute of International and Regional Studies, I have made a video documentary about ressentiment/resentment and its various political ramifications. https://www.eur.nl/en/esphil/events/politics-anger-film-and-discussion-2019-11-26 As part of this course I will organize another screening.

Course plan and literature

1. Ugly Feelings

Mandatory reading:
- Slavoj Žižek, “Slavoj Žižek on the Charlie Hebdo massacre: Are the worst really full of passionate intensity?,” New Statesman, January 10, 2015,
Recommended literature:
- Fiodor Dostoievski, *Notes from the Underground*

2. From Resentment to Ressentiment

Mandatory reading:

Recommended literature on resentment:
- Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 2.8-2.10
- Peter Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974).

Recommended literature on ressentiment:

3. Nietzsche on Ressentiment 1

Mandatory reading:
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Why I am so Wise, 6-8 (Numbers always refer to paragraphs, not pages!)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part II ‘On Redemption’, ‘Tarantulas’
- F.N. Human, *All too Human* I par60 + II The Wanderer and his Shadow par29, par33
- F.N. Second Untimely Meditation, ‘The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life’, 1, 2, 3
Recommended literature:
- Martin Heidegger, ‘Wer ist Nietzsches Zarathustra’ and ‘What is Called Thinking’

4. Nietzsche on Ressentiment 2

Mandatory reading:

Recommended literature:

5. Nietzsche on the Priest 1

Primary literature:

Recommended secondary literature:
- Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, ch. 4 ‘From Ressentiment to Bad Conscience’

6. Ressentiment and Envy 1: Christianity and Democracy

Primary literature:

Recommended primary literature:


7. Nietzsche on the Priest 2

Mandatory reading:
- Friedrich Nietzsche, Ecce Homo, ‘On the Genealogy of Morals’

Recommended secondary literature:
- Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil, 52, 195.
- Sjoerd van Tuinen, ‘The Drama of Ressentiment: The Philosopher versus the Priest’ in: Ceciel Meiborg & Sjoerd van Tuinen, Deleuze and the Passions (New York: Punctum Books, 2016), pp. 97-102. [https://www.academia.edu/15364259/The_Drama_of_Ressentiment_the_Philosopher_versus_the_Priest_essay_on_Nietzsche_Foucault_Deleuze_and_the_priest_as_psychosocial_type_2014](https://www.academia.edu/15364259/The_Drama_of_Ressentiment_the_Philosopher_versus_the_Priest_essay_on_Nietzsche_Foucault_Deleuze_and_the_priest_as_psychosocial_type_2014)

8. From Pastoral Power to Biopolitics

Primary literature:

Recommended reading:

9. Ressentiment and Envy 2: Narcissism and Identity Politics


Recommended reading:

10. Authentic Ressentiment? Witnessing Witnessing

Primary literature:

Recommended primary literature:
- Arne Hohan Vetlesen, ‘A Case for Resentment: Jean Améry versus Primo Levi’

11. Authentic Ressentiment? Race and Gender


**Recommended literature:**


**12. Irenics of Ressentiment**


**Recommend literature:**

- Stolze, Ted. n.d. “Indignation: Spinoza and the desire to revolt” [https://www.academia.edu/2578459/Indignation_Spinoza_on_the_Desire_to_Revolt](https://www.academia.edu/2578459/Indignation_Spinoza_on_the_Desire_to_Revolt)
- Sjoerd van Tuinen, “Die beste aller möglichen Welten?”, in: *Profil* (Fall 2017), [https://www.academia.edu/35009801/Die_beste_aller_m%C3%B6glichen_Welten_In_Profil_2017_Special_Issue_on_Peter_Sloterdijk_pp._3_17](https://www.academia.edu/35009801/Die_beste_aller_m%C3%B6glichen_Welten_In_Profil_2017_Special_Issue_on_Peter_Sloterdijk_pp._3_17)