

SHOULD ANGER BE ENCOURAGED IN THE CLASSROOM?
POLITICAL EDUCATION, CLOSED-MINDEDNESS, AND
CIVIC EPIPHANY

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ABSTRACT. In light of recent political developments in Western democracies, several political commentators and theorists have argued that encouraging anger in citizens may contribute to social justice and should therefore constitute an aim of civic education. In this article, Douglas Yacek investigates these claims in depth. In doing so, he expands on previous work on the political and educational significance of anger — particularly by critical and “agonistic” theorists of civic education — in two distinct ways. First, Yacek explores the psychological costs and benefits of cultivating student anger. Second, he examines the potential cultural effects of anger in Western democratic societies. While sympathetic to the defenses of anger that have been recently offered in political and educational theory, Yacek concludes that we should be cautious about embracing anger in civic education. In particular, he argues that anger involves serious psychological risk, may exacerbate the social problems that it sets out to solve, and can lead to a disposition of adversarial and politically counterproductive closed-mindedness. In the closing sections, Yacek suggests that experiences he calls “civic epiphanies” are central to cultivating a politically beneficial form of open-mindedness, and argues that such experiences should therefore be encouraged in civic education.

KEY WORDS. anger; political emotions; civic education; responsiveness

INTRODUCTION

The political discourse of Western democracies has become increasingly oppositional and strident, fueled by hostility, frustration, and mistrust. Rightist agitators regularly lambaste the left for its economic naiveté, self-righteous cosmopolitanism, and dovish foreign policy preferences, while leftist intellectuals incessantly ridicule the right — on popular nightly TV shows, in respected news outlets, and in social media — for their backwardness in all things moral and political. From one perspective, this increasing antagonism is a worrying indicator of the fraying social fabric of public life. It seems an ill omen for democracy when civility and dialogue give way to angry self-assertion and *Realpolitik*. One-upmanship, contestation, and strife appear to be no great basis for political community.

In an intriguing turn of political conscience, however, several political commentators and advocates have recently affirmed the value of conflict and anger in the political sphere. On the one hand, anger seems to be a justifiable reaction to the current political scene. How could we be anything but angry at the current state of public affairs, in which crude power politics, racial hostility, and general incivility abound? In an effort to motivate voter turnout for the 2018 midterm elections, *New York Times* editorialist David Leonhardt captures this sentiment well. Before counting off several objectionable aspects of Donald Trump’s candidacy and presidency to date, Leonhardt states, “If you’re not angry yet, you should be.”¹

1. David Leonhardt, “Get Angry, and Get Involved,” *New York Times*, October 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/07/opinion/midterms-trump-republicans-supreme-court.html>.

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Furthermore, the role of anger in politics seems to point to an important gender inequality. Male anger is omnipresent in the political sphere, feminists rightly observe, and female anger is too often demonized. Shouldn't women mobilize their anger to meet that of their male counterparts and thereby continue the struggle for equal influence? Speaking directly to her female readers in an opinion piece for the *New York Times* published a week before Leonhardt's column, Rebecca Traister recommends precisely this: "If you are angry today, or if you have been angry for a while, and you're wondering whether you're allowed to be as angry as you feel, let me say: Yes. Yes, you are allowed. You are, in fact, compelled."²

Parallel to this movement in the public sphere, several political and educational theorists have argued likewise that political progress may depend upon activating emotions of this kind and valence. These theorists suggest that, far from being emotions we should suppress, indignation and anger may be the emotional reservoirs we need to get our social agenda off the ground. For Axel Honneth, "negative emotions, such as being ashamed or enraged, feeling hurt or indignant" are the "missing psychological link" required to "motivate the subject to enter a practical struggle" for recognition.³ In line with Honneth, some political theorists have called anger the "essential political emotion," a "spoken resistance to subordination, provoked by a violated expectation of justice," which boldly "questions the rationality of the social order."⁴ On this basis, several educational theorists have argued for the significance of cultivating anger in civic education. According to Claudia Ruitenberg, for example, recent political events in North America provide renewed impetus for cultivating a disposition of "intransigent indignation" toward the injustices committed against marginalized and oppressed others. Unlike rage and resentment, Ruitenberg argues, this special form of "anger" can "play a ... positive role in political education," as it forms the emotional ground from which injustice can be recognized and combatted.⁵ This proposal is a further articulation of previous work in critical and "agonistic" civic education, in which the "potential of anger in

2. Rebecca Traister, "Fury Is a Political Weapon. And Women Need to Wield It," *New York Times*, September 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/fury-is-a-political-weapon-and-women-need-to-wield-it.html>.

3. Axel Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press): 136, 135.

4. Peter Lyman, "The Politics of Anger: On Silence, Ressentiment and Political Speech," *Socialist Review* 11, no. 3 (1981): 61, 66.

5. Claudia W. Ruitenberg, "Learning to Be Difficult: Civic Education and Intransigent Indignation," *On Education: Journal for Research and Debate* 1, no. 1 (2018): <https://www.oneducation.net/no-01-march-2018/learning-difficult/>, 1.

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enabling resistance"⁶ is highlighted, particularly because it "motivates and continues to fuel activity and conflict"⁷ that can bring about transformative social change.⁸

With this shift of political perspective, both the academic and larger public community have raised a fascinating and important question, one that deserves closer attention. If emotions like anger and indignation can provide lasting motivation in the struggle against injustice, should they be encouraged in the civic classroom? In previous attempts to answer this question in the scholarly discussion, theorists have often emphasized the political effects of the angry emotion. They generally fall into two camps: those who maintain that cultivating anger will produce beneficial political outcomes and those who argue that this would undermine the lasting efficacy of political movements.⁹ In this article, I seek to expand the terms of this debate in two ways.¹⁰ First, I explore the psychological dimensions of political anger. In other words, I begin with the question: What are the costs and benefits to the individual when his or her anger is incited to political ends? Second, I investigate the cultural dimensions of political anger — that is, the ways in which anger colors our dispositions toward others in democratic societies. These dispositions, which can vacillate between responsiveness and apathy, open- and closed-mindedness, directly affect our ability to flourish as a democratic society. Thus, I am here interested in the question: Does anger make us more responsive and open-minded toward our fellow democratic citizens, or less so?

While I am sympathetic to the defenses of anger that have been recently offered in political and educational theory, I come to the conclusion that we should be cautious about embracing anger in civic education. In particular, I argue that

6. Michalinos Zembylas, "Mobilizing Anger for Social Justice Education: The Politicization of the Emotions in Education," *Teaching Education* 18, no. 1 (2007): 25.

7. Mary Holmes, "The Importance of Being Angry: Anger in Political Life," *European Journal of Social Theory* 7, no. 2 (2004): 123–132.

8. Sharon Todd, "Living in a Dissonant World: Toward an Agonistic Cosmopolitics for Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29, no. 2 (2010): 213–228; Ásgeir Tryggvason, "The Political as Presence: On Agonism in Citizenship Education," *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 24, no. 3 (2017): 252–265; and Kathleen Knight Abowitz, "The War on Public Education: Agonist Democracy and the Fight for Schools as Public Things," *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 25, no. 1 (2018): 1–15. Compare with Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013). See also Megan Boler's defense of "moral anger" for political education in *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

9. For the latter, see Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Glen Pettigrove, "Meekness and 'Moral' Anger," *Ethics* 122, no. 2 (2012): 341–370.

10. For another expansion of this debate's focus on the political effects of anger — namely, into whether anger may sometimes be "apt" — see Amia Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2018): 123–144; and Agnes Callard, "The Reason to be Angry Forever," in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, ed. Owen Flanagan and Myisha Cherry (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

anger involves serious psychological risk, may exacerbate the social problems that it sets out to solve, and can lead to a form of closed-mindedness that is insensitive to the lived experiences of others. In the closing sections, I turn to a more constructive task, suggesting that certain kinds of experiences that I call “civic epiphanies” are of particular interest for civic educators. Such experiences, as moments in which we recognize the humanity of those we had previously considered our political enemies, are central to cultivating a politically beneficial form of open-mindedness. As such, it is epiphany rather than anger that should be encouraged in civic education.

THE ANGRY INDIVIDUAL: COSTS AND BENEFITS

Perhaps the best place to start our inquiry into the connections between anger, political progress, and individual psychology is to consider the views of some of our most exemplary and effective political actors on anger. Do these actors see anger and indignation as beneficial motivators for productive political action? Clearly populist agitators of all stripes would underwrite the motivational efficacy and usefulness of political anger. But what if even exemplars of equanimity, humanity, and generosity were to defend its use? If we take a look at a few passages from the writings of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Gandhi, we seem to find a defense of anger’s political usefulness. In an oft-quoted line from a speech on W. E. B. Du Bois, King claims, “The supreme task is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force.”¹¹ In *The Gift of Anger*, Gandhi’s grandson, Arun Gandhi, recalls his grandfather telling him, “Anger is good. I get angry all the time. ... I have learned to *use* my anger for good.”¹² Yet another classic source seems to support the motivational expediency of anger. Aristotle claims, for example, that there is a vice of deficiency relative to anger. Inirascibility, as he calls it, refers to a state of blameworthy emotional passivity and inertia:

The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised. This will be the good-tempered man, then, since good temper is praised. ... The deficiency, whether it is a sort of inirascibility or whatever it is, is blamed. For those who are not angry at the things they should be are thought to be fools, and so are those who are not angry in the right way, at the right time, or with the right persons.¹³

If King and Gandhi consider anger to be a political good, and the even-keeled Aristotle includes anger in his vision of the virtuous person, then perhaps it is a valuable political motivator that we might cultivate in students. Before resting on this conclusion, however, we should delve a bit deeper into what Gandhi, King,

11. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Honoring Dr. Du Bois, No. 2, 1968,” in: *Freedomways Reader: Prophets in Their Own Country*, ed. Esther C. Jackson (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 36.

12. Arun Gandhi, *The Gift of Anger: And Other Lessons from My Grandfather Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Gallery Books: 2017), 18 (emphasis added).

13. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathon Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1125b32–1126a8.

and Aristotle mean when they defend using anger “in the right way,” or when they invoke its “transforming power.” Counseling his grandson on how to grapple with his bouts of anger, Gandhi suggests that the emergence of anger presents a kind of ethical imperative to the individual: “Every time you feel great anger stop and write down who or what caused your feeling and why you reacted so angrily. The goal is to get to the root of the anger. Only when you understand the source can you find a solution.”¹⁴ Anger should set a search into motion, Gandhi claims, and the ability to take up this search is itself something that demands practice. In another place, Gandhi writes, for example:

It is not that I do not get angry. I don't give vent to my anger. I cultivate the quality of patience as angerlessness, and generally speaking, I succeed. ... How I find it possible to control it [anger] would be a useless question, for it is a habit that everyone must cultivate and must succeed in forming by constant practice.¹⁵

Is this not a contradiction in Gandhi's view of anger? Why would Gandhi practice patience as angerlessness if he thinks it can be “use[d] ... for good”?¹⁶ The answer, it seems, lies in what is meant by the “usefulness” of anger. On the one hand, Gandhi points out that anger possesses a certain affective force that can motivate action. Hence, his assurance to his grandson that his anger need not be a source of shame but can become something productive. In particular, anger can be an indication that there is something wrong in one's surroundings or in one's inner life. It acts as a kind of signal, alerting the individual to an injustice that demands rectification or perhaps to a private insecurity that should be interrogated openly. Gandhi's view thus seems to underscore two instrumental uses for anger: motivation and signaling.¹⁷ However, Gandhi does not advocate using anger in the sense of indulging the feeling as it comes to us. Rather, we are to control our anger when it emerges and determine its true source so that we can direct its affective energy toward its remedy or removal.

The view of anger's productivity defended by Gandhi is thus a nuanced one. The *use* that is imputed to the angry emotion is not found in its direct expression but rather in its overcoming or sublimation, a practice that ultimately transforms it altogether. When King refers to anger as a “transforming force,” he seems to have something like this in mind: a double transformation of the self and its political surroundings. Of course, King is aware that the experience of prejudice and discrimination is liable to induce anger, but the “nonviolent resister” must immediately move beyond this disposition, resolving “not

14. Arun Gandhi, *The Gift of Anger*, 21.

15. Mahatma Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 105.

16. Arun Gandhi, *The Gift of Anger*, 18.

17. Nussbaum argues that anger can have a third use: When someone often reacts with anger toward others, this can deter others from attempting to slight them or infringe upon their rights. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 37–38. For another discussion of anger's signaling function, see Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*, 135f.

... to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding." For this reason, King believes that the true revolutionary not only "avoids external violence or external physical violence but also internal violence of spirit."¹⁸

Martha Nussbaum considers this stance to be an important contributor to the success of King and Gandhi's projects of nonviolent political action. As she points out in her study of King and Gandhi, "[i]t is only through the inner transformation involved in replacing resentment by love and generosity" that King and Gandhi thought their politics of nonviolence could avoid producing personally destructive and ultimately unstable political outcomes.¹⁹ This transformative process toward an affirmative, humane, and future-oriented disposition is what Nussbaum refers to as the *Transition*, and she points out that not only King and Gandhi, but also Nelson Mandela and other remarkably effective revolutionary political leaders, have considered it to be indispensable for the fight against oppression.²⁰

The educational character of this theory of anger — that is, its conception of the angry emotion as a *transitional* moment in an educational process toward generosity and affirmation — is important to keep in mind, since it indicates a looseness in the way we tend to talk about anger. To speak of the "usefulness" or "productivity" of anger misleadingly places agency in an emotional state rather than in the individual him- or herself, whose challenge it is to resist the direct expression of the angry emotion, to focus on the problem that has spurred it on, and to transform its affective force into something productive and affirmative.

This cannot be the last word, however. Although King and Gandhi argue forcefully that the anger that happens to arise in our encounters with injustice should be transformed into an affirmative disposition, it is not clear whether anger ought to be actively incited to political ends. Perhaps the transition from anger to affirmation is not only something we should practice in the face of *accidental anger*, as it might be called, but something educators should set into motion. If anger is the only thing that can signal injustice and motivate its rectification, for example, then perhaps such *intended anger* is in fact an important aim of civic education. Should we get students angry about injustice?

There are several reasons to be skeptical about the value of encouraging students' anger. First, while Gandhi and King both believe that anger (when transformed into generosity and affirmation, of course) can have some political use,

18. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Power of Nonviolence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 12, 13.

19. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 218, 226f.

20. Ibid. Although I am lumping Gandhi and King together here, they do seem to have slightly different stances on the role of anger in civic action. See Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 31–33.

they believe there are emotions that are much more productive for alerting us to injustice and motivating us to counteract it. In spite of King's concern about our tendency to become blind to injustices, he does not recommend cultivating an angry or indignant disposition as a means of sensitizing us to them. Rather, in his addresses and sermons he often refers to a disposition he calls "creative maladjustment," in which we recognize injustice and yet resist becoming consumed by anger when we do so. In reflecting on the events in Montgomery, Alabama, King states that "there are some things in our social system that I'm proud to be maladjusted to, and I call upon you to be maladjusted to. I never intend to adjust myself to the viciousness of lynch-mobs[,] ... to the evils of segregation and discrimination[,] ... to the tragic inequalities of [the] economic system[,] ... to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence."²¹ Although we might expect such a depressing list to lead to a call for an angry backlash, King instead immediately follows it with examples of individuals from history, Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson among them, who chose with "moral courage" and creative determination to uphold the ideals of equality and justice. In other places, King highlights the importance of another political emotion central to the fight for racial equality — civic love. "As you press on for justice," King urges, "be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love."²² Even in the face of our supposed enemy, we should not submit to anger, but "just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can't stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they'll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load."²³ According to King, creative maladjustment and civic love are necessary for revolutionary political action.

This leads us to a second important consideration, which brings the psychological risks of inciting anger more directly into focus. Recent research in the psychology of emotion suggests that anger is often a personally hazardous emotion associated with observable and well-documented psychological suffering. It has been shown, for example, that anger strongly correlates with high blood pressure,²⁴

21. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The 'New Negro' of the South: Behind the Montgomery Story," in *Birth of a New Age, December 1955–December 1956*, vol. 3 of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Stewart Burns, Susan Carson, Dana Powell, and Peter Holloran (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 286.

22. Martin Luther King Jr., "The Most Durable Power," in *Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948–March 1963*, vol. 4 of *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Susan Carson, Susan Englander, Troy Jackson, and Gerald L. Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 302.

23. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," in *Advocate of the Social Gospel, September 1948–March 1963*, ed. Carson et al., 321–322. Compare with John Fantuzzo, "Facing the Civic Love Gap: James Baldwin's Civic Education for Interpersonal Solidarity," *Educational Theory* 68, no. 4–5 (2019): 385–402.

24. Jerry L. Deffenbacher, Eugene R. Oetting, Rebekah S. Lynch, and Chad D. Morris, "The Expression of Anger and Its Consequences," *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 34, no. 7 (1996): 576; and Aron Wolfe

cardiovascular disease,²⁵ aggression,²⁶ alcoholism,²⁷ drug use,²⁸ dangerous driving,²⁹ fetal stress (in pregnant mothers),³⁰ self-punishment, and social isolation,³¹ and that anger management techniques that emphasize quick emotional disengagement and dialogue consistently lead to fewer of these negative consequences.³² Additionally, several studies point to the negative cognitive impacts of anger, demonstrating that it can breed a kind of “causal closed-mindedness.” In explaining an imagined mishap, angry subjects used “simplified cognitive processing (i.e. reduced number of cues used in making judgments),”³³ drew on “irrelevant information,”³⁴ and “blamed the mishap on other people” more often than neutral subjects, who consistently “blamed others less than did angry subjects.”³⁵ If anger is the motivational sword we use to usher in a more just world, it has two, very sharp, edges.

In spite of these potential hazards, might there be positive psychological effects of anger? What about the cathartic feeling we can get when we allow ourselves to angrily demonstrate our dissatisfaction with someone or something? This catharsis may be of great importance for someone who tends to suppress such

Siegmán and Timothy W. Smith, *Anger, Hostility, and the Heart* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1994).

25. Aron Wolfe Siegmán, “Cardiovascular Consequences of Expressing, Experiencing, and Repressing Anger,” *Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 16, no. 6 (1993): 539–569; and Ari Haukkala, Hanna Konttinen, and Tiina Laatikainen, “Hostility, Anger Control, and Anger Expression as Predictors of Cardiovascular Disease,” *Psychosomatic Medicine* 72, no. 6 (2010): 556–562.

26. Cristopher J. Fives, Grace Kong, J. Ryan Fuller, and Raymond DiGiuseppe, “Anger, Aggression, and Irrational Beliefs in Adolescents,” *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 35, no. 3 (2011): 199–208.

27. Matthew T. Liebsohn, Eugene R. Oetting, and Jerry L. Deffenbacher, “Effects of Trait Anger on Alcohol Consumption and Consequences,” *Journal of Child and Adolescent Substance Abuse* 3, no. 3 (1994): 17–32.

28. Afsoon Eftekhari, Aaron P. Turner, and Mary E. Larimer, “Anger Expression, Coping, and Substance Use in Adolescent Offenders,” *Addictive Behaviors* 29, no. 5 (2004): 1001–1008.

29. Jerry L. Deffenbacher, David M. Deffenbacher, Rebekah S. Lynch, and Tracy L. Richards, “Anger, Aggression, and Risky Behavior: A Comparison of High and Low Anger Drivers,” *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 41, no. 6 (2003): 701–718.

30. Tiffany Field, M. Diego, Maria Hernandez-Reif, F. Salman, S. Schanberg, Cynthia Kuhn, Regina Yando, and Debra Bendell, “Prenatal Anger Effects on the Fetus and Neonate,” *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 22, no. 3 (2002): 260–266.

31. Deffenbacher et al., “The Expression of Anger and Its Consequences,” 586.

32. Raymond DiGiuseppe and Raymond Chip Tafrate, “Anger Treatment for Adults: A Meta-Analytic Review,” *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 10, no. 1 (2003): 70–84.

33. Jennifer S. Lerner, Julie H. Goldberg, and Philip E. Tetlock, “Sober Second Thought: The Effects of Accountability, Anger, and Authoritarianism on Attributions of Responsibility,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 24, no. 6 (1998): 563.

34. *Ibid.*, 570.

35. Dacher Keltner, Phoebe C. Ellsworth, and Kari Edwards, “Beyond Simple Pessimism: Effects of Sadness and Anger on Social Perception,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 64, no. 5 (1993): 745.

feelings of dissatisfaction, a behavior that can lead to its own kind of psychological suffering.³⁶ Indeed, this tendency to emotional suppression may be a common quality among people in oppressive situations, in which (angry) expressions of dissatisfaction or the pointing out of injustice are considered inappropriate and punishable challenges to authority.³⁷

I am sympathetic to the concern raised in this objection and think that a general indictment of anger in Stoic fashion is therefore misguided. Especially when the expression of anger is a one-off (or a “very-few-times-off”) episode in a controlled setting, it seems unlikely that it would bring about the overwhelmingly negative effects of anger listed above, many of which arise when anger becomes a regular emotional occurrence. Yet, in calling for the cultivation of anger and intransigent indignation in the civic classroom, this is precisely what is encouraged: an anger that has become a constant disposition toward the social world. Although the idea of a defender of equality ever-indignant before injustice may appeal on some level, this indignation is liable to become a brooding ire always ready to break through the surface of what it takes to be quietistic bourgeois civility in order to realize the ends it considers just. This brooding ire is what Friedrich Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. According to Nietzsche’s account in the *Genealogy of Morals*, anger and resentment characteristically appear to their hosts as irresistible emotional reactions to some wrongdoing that has been committed against them.³⁸ They therefore pose as immediate *causes* of our actions to remedy the wrongdoing. Yet Nietzsche observes that these emotions are in fact *effects* of our already internalized ways of engaging with suffering and hardship in general. Lacking a practiced disposition for grappling with such hardship by, for example, channeling our affective reactions toward productive ends, we allow the irritation it has caused us to grow into anger, resentment, and a desire for revenge. Far from making things better for us, Nietzsche points out that regularly indulging such feelings can be utterly debilitating.

The question is why we would allow ourselves to develop a disposition to anger if it has such negative and even debilitating effects upon us. Nietzsche’s answer is that the indulgence of resentment involves a “venting of affects,” an emotional relief that gives us a fleeting and false sense of power and whose phenomenological intensity numbs the irritation that has aroused the state. Hence Nietzsche’s claim that resentment has an *anaesthetic* effect upon us.³⁹ This anaesthetic thus helps us to escape, if only briefly, the suffering that is the true source of the problem.

From this perspective, the cathartic pleasure of anger and resentment is a precarious indulgence. It is a kind of narcotic, the easy way to grapple with —

36. Siegman, “Cardiovascular Consequences of Expressing, Experiencing, and Repressing Anger.”

37. Thank you to Howard Curzer for bringing this possible objection to my attention.

38. For Nussbaum, resentment is a special case of anger, with some phenomenological differences but an identical conceptual structure. See Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 262.

39. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and Reginald Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1989), 127 (GM III:15).

or, rather, to avoid grappling with — the real problem before us, and it is one that turns occasional users into addicts. As one commentator on the recent election in the United States puts it, “Anger is the lazy person’s emotion. It’s quick, it’s binary, it’s delicious. And more and more, we’re gorging on it.”⁴⁰ Anger feels good, it promises much, but we should be very skeptical of its promises and even more skeptical of the solutions it recommends. If this is so, civic education that exploits or even cultivates anger involves serious psychological risk.

THE ANGRY CULTURE: RISKS AND REWARDS

In the foregoing section, we focused on the psychological pitfalls of education for anger. Let’s place these to one side for a moment. What of the potentially beneficial *cultural* impact of education for anger? In light of recent psychological work on the effects of anger, we saw that inciting student anger is a double-edged sword, involving risks to students’ emotional stability and health. But double-edged swords are still swords. Sure, there may be some collateral damage involved in the march toward justice, but if education for anger can realize a more just society, then how could we resist? Some theorists think that we need not worry too much about the potential hazards of cultivating political anger for a relatively simple reason. If we, through education, can ensure that the *object* of students’ anger or enmity is assigned appropriately — namely, to infringements against others’ equality — and if we can ensure that it does not descend into rage, resentment, and a desire for vengeance, then we have won an important source of motivational energy for the cause.⁴¹ Properly directed anger, while perhaps not an ideal emotional reaction, may be an important impetus for combatting injustices in this woefully nonideal world we inhabit.

The first question we might raise here is whether we can reliably direct anger away from rage and revenge and toward productive civic ends in the way proposed. There is again reason for skepticism. In his “Education after Auschwitz,” for example, Theodor Adorno argues that the cultural conditions that led to the outbreak of barbarism in Nazi Germany persist in postwar Western societies. Behind the veneer of civil discourse, polite business relations, efficient bureaucratic administration, comfortable habits of consumption, and pleasing mass entertainment lurk “recurring patterns of decay” [*Zerfallstendenzen*], which are engendered and encouraged by the unnatural psychological repressions that these various social practices require.⁴² He explains: “One can speak of the claustrophobia of human life in the administered world, a feeling of being trapped

40. Jeffrey Kluger, “America’s Anger Is Out of Control,” *TIME*, June 1, 2016, <http://time.com/4353606/anger-america-enough-already/>.

41. Claudia W. Ruitenberg, “Educating Political Adversaries: Chantal Mouffe and Radical Democratic Citizenship Education,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 28, no. 3 (2009): 277; and Ruitenberg, “Learning to Be Difficult,” 2.

42. Theodor W. Adorno, “Erziehung nach Auschwitz” [Education after Auschwitz], in *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit: Vorträge und Gespräche mit Helmut Becker [und G. Kadelbach] 1959–1969* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), 91.

in a thickly spun web of thoroughly socialized relations. The thicker the web, the more the individual wants out, while it is precisely this thickness which blocks his or her escape."⁴³ The problem is that, when anger is incited in such a context, it can easily become directed, not at social injustices, but at civilization itself, at "the system": "This [increasing feeling of being trapped] strengthens the anger against civilization itself. The protest against it becomes violent and irrational."⁴⁴

Adorno's observation is important for understanding the dangers of attempting to cultivate the "right kind" of anger in an already furious society with strong libertarian leanings. Anger, indignation, and resentment are volatile emotions whose objects are extremely difficult to control. For example, the seemingly justified anger of factory workers whose livelihoods are undermined by their company's choice to attract cheaper labor from immigrants can quickly become resentment toward the people who take these jobs, and then toward all immigrants. An insistence that we mobilize students' anger to productive civic ends is thus dangerous business. When the anger of an "us" is incited against a "them," the latter quickly grows into a sprawling and supposedly hostile "other," propped up by a corrupt and "rigged" system that can only be dissolved by a revolutionary vanguard. In such a situation, there is no telling what may transpire — or, rather, we can predict what may transpire, and the examples from history are not encouraging.

Clear evidence of this political dynamic has been provided, it seems, by the recent election of Donald Trump in the United States. Trump's electoral success can be attributed, at least in part, to his ability to rouse animus toward a system that is supposedly corrupt to the core, a "deep state" run by "incompetent politicians" who pander to undeserving immigrants and other minority populations. In this way, Trump could exploit the anger and sense of powerlessness of a large swath of discontented voters who felt that their needs had been ignored. One might say that Trump's approach was precisely a strategy of cultivating indignation and anger. All the pieces of the puzzle are there: white rural voters were reacting angrily against a "them," the liberal elites, whom they construed as adversaries and enemies in hopes of establishing a "new hegemony"⁴⁵ — one that rectifies the "injustice" they felt was being committed against them.

In this way, the call for indignation and anger recites the logic of anger that one finds already deeply embedded in the Western political psyche and on both sides of the political aisle. Education for anger is not new; the proposal seems only to entrench the status quo of our political discourse more deeply into our educational institutions. It encourages us to see the problems before us as caused always by some "them" culpable for our suffering, to react with vengeance,

43. *Ibid.*, 90.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 52. Quoted in Todd, "Living in a Dissonant World," 218.

and then, as Nietzsche puts it, to “sanctify [our] *revenge* under the name of *justice*.”⁴⁶

David Foster Wallace captures the essential problem with this type of thinking in his famous commencement speech given at Kenyon College, “This Is Water.” Anger, as we have already seen, is larger than its discussion in political and educational theory — it is deeply embedded in our political consciousness. It is difficult for us to see the political landscape as anything other than a battlefield, and one on which the good guys (among whom we unquestioningly count ourselves) are clearly losing. In a compelling portrayal of this kind of thinking, Wallace recounts what it is like to be stuck in traffic and overcome with “socially conscious” indignation.

I can spend time in the end-of-the-day traffic being disgusted about all the huge, stupid, lane-blocking SUV’s and Hummers and V-12 pickup trucks, burning their wasteful, selfish, forty-gallon tanks of gas, and I can dwell on the fact that the patriotic or religious bumper stickers always seem to be on the biggest, most disgustingly selfish vehicles, ... driven by the ugliest, most inconsiderate and aggressive drivers. And I can think about how our children’s children will despise us for wasting all the future’s fuel, and probably screwing up the climate, and how spoiled and stupid and selfish and disgusting we all are, and how modern consumer society just sucks, and so forth and so on.⁴⁷

About halfway through this passage, the audience of the speech erupts in laughter and applause, and Wallace quickly interjects to remind the audience: “This is an example of how *not* to think.”⁴⁸ This is a fascinating situation. In spite of Wallace’s attempt to imitate the cardinal vice of how we think about others, the audience is distracted by the style of the imitation and falls into the very way of thinking it is meant to criticize. Indeed, there is a certain truth to the observations that Wallace is making here, and even a kind of justification for his anger. Hummers and SUVs are wasteful and bad for the environment; religious bumper stickers are tacky; patriotic slogans are self-righteous; and too many people are inconsiderate and aggressive drivers. So what exactly is wrong with these occasional internal rants that he reenacts for the audience?

Wallace’s surprising claim is that this way of thinking blinds us to certain other realities that we do not like to admit as potentially valid.

The thing is that, of course, there are totally different ways to think about these kinds of situations. In this traffic, all these vehicles stopped and idling in my way, it’s not impossible that some of these people in SUV’s have been in horrible auto accidents in the past and now find driving so terrifying that their therapist has all but ordered them to get a huge, heavy SUV so they can feel safe enough to drive. Or that the Hummer that just cut me off is maybe being driven by a father whose little child is hurt or sick in the seat next to him, and he’s trying to

46. Nietzsche, “On the Genealogy of Morals,” 73–74 (GM II:11).

47. David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life,” in *Way More Than Luck: Commencement Speeches on Living with Bravery, Empathy, and Other Existential Skills* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 2015), 184. Video of Wallace’s commencement speech, given at Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio, May 21, 2005, is available on YouTube video, 22:43, May 19, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=8CrOL-ydFMI>.

48. Wallace, “This Is Water,” 184.

get this kid to the hospital, and he's in a bigger, more legitimate hurry than I am: it is actually I who am in *his* way.⁴⁹

Wallace's point is that our numbness toward the experience of others traps us in a self-centered and self-referential mode of thinking. According to Wallace, our angry judgmentalism and its secret self-congratulation leads to "a closed-mindedness that amounts to an imprisonment so total that the prisoner doesn't even know he's locked up."⁵⁰ For Wallace, this is the "water" in which we (unfortunately) live and that we, like the young fish in the parable, cannot quite perceive.

Wallace thus points to an additional risk we take if we decide to incite student anger. Encouraging anger can lead to a general disposition of closed-mindedness that leaves us untouched and unmoved by the concerns of others. This is thus the second time we have seen closed-mindedness associated with the negative consequences of anger. In the first section, we saw a kind of "causal closed-mindedness" emerge, in which we frequently fall into a mode of thinking that leads us, without reflection, to deem others to be the cause of our troubles. Similarly, we see here that anger can exacerbate our tendency to see others in general as opponents that are always "getting in our way" or "holding us back." Shuttered behind this more global form of closed-mindedness, we are apt to see the social world as an ineluctable "us versus them" contest.⁵¹ Yet, given the increasing entrenchment and partisanship of the public sphere, is there really any alternative?

FROM CLOSED-MINDEDNESS TO CIVIC EPIPHANY

Although Wallace's claims about the prevalence of closed-mindedness may seem to paint a bleak picture of the civic landscape, his account simultaneously suggests how we might come to more responsive and open-minded modes of engaging with each other. The "totally different ways of thinking about these kinds of situations" to which he refers often occur to us suddenly, in an unheeded moment of insight, when we realize that Hummer drivers and people holding up the line at the supermarket may have reasons for their actions that are worthy of our respect and admiration. Because these insights — which I call "civic epiphanies" — can also be instances of overcoming seemingly intractable oppositions among fellow citizens, they can serve an important civic function as well. Civic epiphany is important because the disposition Wallace, King, and Gandhi all call us to embrace — that is, one of empathy, generosity, and solidarity — is difficult to achieve in a world steeped in anger, "us versus them" thinking, and the "recurring patterns of decay" of which Adorno implored us to beware. Partly because of these social conditions and partly because of inherent problems in contemporary schools, we cannot fully count on our educational institutions to have instilled in us the requisite democratic virtues for constructive engagement with one another. Fortunately, experiences like civic epiphanies can radically

49. *Ibid.*, 184–185.

50. *Ibid.*, 177.

51. This is a central premise of the agonistic conception of politics. See Mouffe, *Agonistics*.

reform our civic perspective and jolt us toward a more responsive and open-minded state of mind, even with those with whom we radically disagree.

One example of such an epiphany was recounted on *The Moth Radio Hour*, a radio show featuring regular people who tell stories about their lives. Danusia Trevino, a Polish immigrant and ex-punk rocker, begins her story by recounting her libertine years as a member of a New York City punk rock band, when she was full of rage toward the conformism of bourgeois society. In those days, Trevino would stay out until five or six in the morning and, as she made her way home, would watch the droves of people heading to their conventional jobs, feeling “great pity for their lives.”⁵² Trevino’s rigorous rock-and-roll lifestyle is interrupted one day by a letter in the mail summoning her to jury duty. Although she tries her very best to avoid the ordeal at all costs, the judge — to her great chagrin — takes a liking to her and chooses her as juror #1. When she meets her fellow jurors, Trevino is actually relieved. Her jury members all seem like run-of-the-mill conservatives and will therefore almost certainly condemn the young black man on trial, she thinks. Since her description of them is quite funny and also important for understanding her epiphany, I quote from it at length:

[There were] ten very uptight, rigid Wall-Street type of people, and one elderly Spanish gentleman. There was this anemic looking woman wearing a blue suit with flat shoes and straight, black, uneventful hair. Then there was middle-aged guy with beige pleated pants that went above his waist, [a] blue oxford shirt with bowtie and a very low quality toupee. And he acted as if there was absolutely nothing wrong with that look. Then there was this younger guy with a briefcase — the groovy type who thinks Eric Clapton is a god and invented the blues. And the rest of them were wearing suits. I was positive they were all Republicans, that they were probably married to their childhood sweethearts, had fantastic jobs, with all benefits and room for promotion, that probably on Sundays they went with their whole families to the park to walk slowly, take in the air and admire the vegetation. “What a life,” I thought. And now we were locked here together and they were going to put this young man in jail.⁵³

Trevino is determined to be the defendant’s lifeline. “Thank god they picked me,” she thinks, “so [the defendant] could have at least one truly liberal open-minded soul on his side.”⁵⁴ As it turns out, however, Trevino becomes convinced of the guilt of the defendant. Although the prosecution presents a slew of evidence that clearly seems to evince the defendant’s guilt, the judge annuls a majority of the sloppily presented evidence. In deliberation, the jury members all agree that the defendant probably committed the crime, but several argue that the prosecution did not successfully prove their case. After forty minutes, Trevino has grown impatient and is ready to vote. She votes “guilty.” The older “anemic-looking” woman is also ready to vote. She votes “not guilty.” Then, one by one, each of the other jury members votes “not guilty.”

52. Danusia Trevino, “Guilty,” *The Moth: True Stories Told Live*, December 13, 2016, <https://themoth.org/stories/guilty>. I transcribed all the following quotations myself from this audio file.

53. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

Trevino is taken aback. She has gone from the defendant's only lifeline to his sole indictor. Although this comes as a great surprise to her, it is what happens next that truly moves Trevino. The other jury members can appreciate in a way that she cannot that the case made, not the gut reaction, is what matters in legal deliberation.

[T]hese eleven people talked to me one by one with patience and gentleness, and they didn't say that I was wrong, they said they understood where I was coming from. They said, "Maybe you were influenced by the information we were supposed to forget." When I was still not convinced, they sent the older Spanish gentleman to talk to me, and he sat very close to me, and he looked me in the eyes and he said, "You know maybe one day somebody that you love very much will be in this situation where it will look like they have committed a crime, but they're actually innocent, and this law that says a person is innocent until proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt will save their life. By any means [sic], it's not a perfect law [Trevino starts to tear up], but it's the law we have, and we were asked to follow and honor it in this court today. So please consider that." And uhh, I was a little surprised how thoughtful all these people were. And uhh, I changed my vote.⁵⁵

The jury exonerates the defendant. After delivering the "not guilty" verdict to the court, the elated family of the defendant waited on the jury outside the courtroom to thank them. The thoughts that occurred to Trevino demonstrate how much she had been changed by the example of her fellow jurors.

As [the family members] were hugging everyone, I was hoping that nobody was gonna tell them about me in the deliberation room. And I wanted to say to them, "Don't thank me. Thank these eleven, really incredible — probably still Republican — people. Because there is something else. They've managed to crack my heart open against my will." [Trevino's voice is trembling.] Then came a time when I had to say goodbye to my colleagues. And, uhh, I didn't want to part with them. I wanted grab onto their legs and say, "Take me with you. Don't leave me here alone. Take me to the park. For a walk. Teach me how to admire the vegetation. Teach me how to live." [Crying] And, umm, but they had to go back to their regular jobs. And when somebody says today that they don't want to do the jury duty. I say to them, "Please go. You never know what can happen at the jury duty."⁵⁶

So much of what we should strive for in our civic relationships is, I think, contained in the story of Trevino's transformation. The understanding that the jury members showed Trevino in spite of her hasty judgment, the care with which they engaged with her views, and their resolve to defend the position that better aligned with the principles of democratic jurisprudence all combine to serve as an exemplary model of responsive civic deliberation. But even beyond this, the jury members' treatment of Trevino and their principled reasoning created the conditions for Trevino to come to a crucial civic insight — a kind of civic epiphany. Trevino realized that the people she had previously judged to be hopeless conservatives and uptight Wall Street types were not only capable of sound, impartial, and compassionate reasoning, but were admirable people themselves. Their attention to the details of the case, their intellectual discipline, and their basic empathy allowed Trevino's peers to come to a more just decision than she could, in spite of her self-understanding as a "socially conscious" and critically

55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.

thinking punk rocker. It dawns on Trevino that there may be something about her peers' conventionality and conformism that is worthy of admiration after all, and perhaps even that there is something a little ridiculous about her own self-image. She even says, with some heartfelt irony of course, that she wants them to take her to the park and teach her how to admire the vegetation. That lifestyle, for all its problems, could at least accommodate the reasoning that led to the rightful exoneration of the defendant.

The lesson for civic education to derive from epiphanies like Trevino's is that we have something to learn from the very people we often demonize. The people we consider our adversaries and enemies can become our teachers. In such moments, we catch a fuller glimpse of their humanity, and we learn to admire and respect them, even while we disagree with them. At the end of the day, Trevino's fellow jury members are "probably still Republicans," but she has learned to lay down her black-and-white, "us versus them" understanding of such political categories. The ironic maxim that her story happens upon — "You never know what can happen at the jury duty"⁵⁷ — calls us to be open to these kinds of civic epiphanies.

CONCLUSION

Trevino's story points to a fruitful area of further inquiry in civic education. How might we create conditions for civic epiphanies in civic education? Although the space allotted here does not allow for a fully developed answer to this question, I hope to have sketched out some of the promises of civic epiphany. Openness to civic epiphany and responsiveness toward others can be powerful antidotes to the combativeness that has become widespread in contemporary political thinking. Though it poses as a natural and expedient political motivator, anger is in fact in profound tension with what should come naturally to us. The recent embrace of anger in politics and education seems to me to be a case of a new Hobbesianism, in which we cannot imagine political life as anything other than a war of all against all. Yet as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the early work of Karl Marx showed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively, Thomas Hobbes's understanding of human nature was ideology dressed in the guise of philosophical anthropology, an importation of the cynical assumptions of bourgeois ambition into the foundations of human community. Natural to humans is not anger and strife, but cooperation and generosity, they both argued.

We should be cautious about embracing this new Hobbesianism, I believe, and it is the critics of anger who, in my view, can provide some final inspiration for the resistance. As Seneca puts it,

Anger, as I have said, is bent on punishment, and that such a desire should find a harbour in man's most peaceful breast accords least of all with his nature. For human life is founded on kindness and concord, and is bound into an alliance for common help, not by terror, but by mutual love.⁵⁸

57. Ibid.

58. Marcus Aurelius, "On Anger," *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, trans. Francis Hutcheson and James Moore (Indianapolis, IN: The Liberty Fund, 2008), 119.

Seneca's statement is almost two millennia old, and yet we would do well to keep this aphorism at the front of our minds when developing an approach to civic education that is fitting for the modern world. Our nature, and the nature of human affairs, is kindness and love, not strife and competition. This is not to say that we should encourage students to remain passive before injustice, as the examples of Gandhi and King show. Rather, the task of civic education is to encourage a firm commitment to realizing a more just world, out of a spirit of affirmation, generosity, and civic love. It may be that civic epiphanies are what we need to get there.