

Article

# Grievance Politics: An Empirical Analysis of Anger Through the Emotional Mechanism of *Ressentiment*

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## Abstract

In this article, we undertake an empirical examination of the psychology of what is often called “the angry citizen,” highlighting *ressentiment* as an important emotional mechanism of grievance politics. Contrary to the short-lived, action-prone emotion of anger proper, *ressentiment* transmutes the inputs of grievance politics like deprivation of opportunity, injustice, shame, humiliation, envy, and inefficacious anger, into the anti-social outputs of morally righteous indignation, destructive anger, hatred, and rage. Our empirical probe uses qualitative and quantitative analysis of 164 excerpts from interviews with US “angry citizens” from the following works: *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016) by Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* (2017) by Michael Kimmel, and *Stiffed: The Roots of Modern Male Rage* (2019) by Susan Faludi. In these seemingly “angry” excerpts, we find markers matching the psychological footprint of *ressentiment* instead of anger proper: victimhood, envy, powerlessness; the defenses of splitting, projection, and denial; and preference for inaction, anti-preferences, and low efficacy. We conclude on the significance of the distinction between anger proper and *ressentiment* for understanding the psychology of grievance politics.

## Keywords

anger; angry citizen; emotional mechanism; grievance; philosophy; political psychology; *ressentiment*; resentment; United States

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

Contemporary politics is angry and vengeful, with affective polarization and uncompromising antagonisms posing a significant challenge for democracies. We examine the psychology of what is often called “the angry citizen,” identifying *ressentiment* as a significant emotional mechanism of grievance politics, distinct from anger proper and aversive affectivity more broadly. Grievance politics refers to the mode of relating to politics primar-

ily through grievances, felt as deprivation of opportunity, injustice, shame, humiliation, envy, and inefficacious anger, and it has recently been the focus of a growing number of studies. Salmela and von Scheve (2018) elaborate on the pro-social forms of grievance politics discussing civil rights and LGBTQ social movement dynamics through the emotional mechanism of *social sharing*. Capelos et al. (2021) examine the relationship between the backward gaze of reactionism, its *ressentimentful* affective core, and collective narcissism with its

precarious social bonds, labeling them “the anti-social triad of grievance politics.” These studies make an important distinction between prosocial and antisocial forms of political grievance. Salmela and Capelos (2021) theorize *ressentiment* as the emotional mechanism that transmutes the inputs of grievance politics into anti-social outputs of morally righteous indignation, destructive anger, hatred, and rage. Flinders and Hinterleitner (2022) discuss the decline of party politics and the rise of grievance politics. Capelos and Demertzis (2018, 2022) examine the dormant support for violent political action among *ressentimentful* citizens, their hollow social contact, precarious collective identities, and their negative relationship with political knowledge, scientific evidence, and emancipatory values, joining recent studies which argue the central role of *ressentiment* in contemporary far-right, populist, and nationalist contexts (Ciulla, 2020; Demertzis, 2020; Pirc, 2018; TenHouten, 2018; Wimberly, 2018).

*Ressentiment* is not a new concept. Originating from Nietzsche (1885/1961) and elaborated by Scheler (1915/1961), it is applied in studies of extremism and fundamentalism (Posłuszna & Posłuszny, 2015; Žižek, 2008), Trumpism (Knauft, 2018; Wimberly, 2018), fanaticism (Katsafanas, 2022), right-wing populism (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017, 2018), reactionism (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018; Capelos & Katsanidou, 2018; Sullivan, 2021), narcissism (Demertzis, 2020), terrorism (Posłuszna, 2019, 2020), extremism (Mishra, 2017), and cynicism (Capelos et al., 2021; Halsall, 2005). Drawing from studies of emotional mechanisms and their key function of transforming an input emotion into a different output emotion (Elster, 1999; Salice & Salmela, 2022), Salmela and Capelos (2021) approach *ressentiment* as an *emotional mechanism* that transmutes political, social, or private grievances felt as deprivation of opportunity, injustice, humiliation, and lack of political efficacy, to anti-social emotional expressions of morally righteous indignation, destructive anger, hatred, and rage.

We use this conceptualization of *ressentiment* to elaborate on the psychological nature of contemporary “angry politics.” We distinguish the *inputs* of grievance politics, such as political disaffection, frustration, deprivation, and discontent, from the *outputs* of grievance politics which can be (a) constructive outputs with collective action potential, delivered through social sharing and (b) anti-social, maladaptive, bitter, and vengeful outputs delivered via *ressentiment*. Angry politics founded on grievance can impart pro-social social change (Salmela & von Scheve, 2018), whereas *ressentimentful* politics founded on grievance are antisocial (Salmela & Capelos, 2021). Fundamentally, we argue, the problem in the study of grievance politics is how to tell apart anger proper from *ressentiment*.

We approach this challenge in three steps. First, we distinguish between anger proper and the vengeful, inefficacious venting of frustrations towards out-groups denoting *ressentiment*. Second, we engage with the

deep psychological processes of *ressentiment* and discuss its employment of defenses, the unconscious mental processes which, through emotional self-adjustment, serve as an invisible “defensive shield” from intrapsychic conflicts, and their affects (Cramer, 2015; Vaillant, 1993). Third, we examine the expressions of *ressentiment* among individuals widely perceived as *angry*. We analyze the content of displays of anger and *ressentiment* in 164 excerpts of interviews with US “angry” citizens sourced from *Angry White Men* (Kimmel, 2017), *Strangers in Their Own Land* (Hochschild, 2016), and *Stiffed: The Roots of Modern Male Rage* (Faludi, 2019). We find key constitutive markers of *ressentiment* (envy, victimhood, powerlessness, destiny, transvaluation, and injustice) in expressions broadly understood as anger, and evidence of its inefficacious approach to politics delivered through inaction and anti-preferences.

The important differences between anger and *ressentiment* elucidate the puzzle of bitter disengagement and alienation from democratic representation which has become a hallmark of contemporary politics. Our article contributes to studies focusing on emotions to understand negativity and affective polarization in politics (Brader, 2006; Gadarian & Albertson, 2012; Huddy et al., 2002, 2008; Jost et al., 2017; Mason et al., 2021; Mayer & Nguyen, 2021; Turner, 2007), the rise of authoritarian and far-right populist leaders, and the processes by which animus and antagonistic politics gain ground in post-truth electoral campaigns (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Betz, 1993; Farkas & Schou, 2019; Forgas et al., 2021; Kisić Merino et al., 2021; Marcus, 2021; Michel et al., 2020; Nai, 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). We also add to the growing number of empirical studies on *ressentiment* which have examined political experiences in populist contexts (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018, 2022; Capelos et al., 2021; Ciulla, 2020; Demertzis, 2020; Kazlauskaitė & Salmela, 2021; Mishra, 2017).

## 2. Anger vs. *Ressentiment*: The Complexities of Repressed Aggression

Anger and *ressentiment* are conceptually and psychologically close but they are not the same emotional experience (Meltzer & Musolf, 2002; Solomon, 1995). Anger is a discrete emotion with a defined object, usually short-lived, and generates action tendencies. We refer to it herein as “anger proper” to distinguish it from general accounts of negative emotionality. Anger-proper arises as a response to the appraisal of an event which is not in the individual’s control, seen as an obstruction or infringement to reaching a goal or satisfying a need. It is bound to personal or social expectations, and results in physiological changes and mental readiness, which prepare an individual for action (Capelos, 2013; Ekman, 2004; Frijda, 2004; Lazarus, 1993; Roseman & Evdokas, 2004). It is associated with negative reactive attitudes towards political objects, decline in political trust, weakened commitment to democratic norms and values,

optimistic risk estimates, out-group hostility and racial aggression, increased discontent, and desire to punish (Brader et al., 2008; Gadarian & Albertson, 2012; Huddy et al., 2008; Lerner et al., 2003; Phoenix, 2019; Webster, 2020). Many contemporary philosophers of emotion consider anger a healthy and appropriate response to unjust or unfair circumstances (Huddleston, 2021; Thompson, 2006; yet for a critique of anger, see Nussbaum, 2016).

If one must think of *ressentiment* in terms of anger, then the closest approximations are inefficacious anger and blunted vindictiveness of a toxic kind. Yet again, *ressentiment* is more complex. According to Nietzsche (1885/1961) and Scheler (1915/1961), *ressentiment* is a largely unconscious experience which works primarily as a “psychic shield” from negative emotions and feelings of injustice and humiliation, as well as deprivation from the desired, with a shadow of inferiority. Salmela and Capelos (2021) offer a consolidated review of theories of *ressentiment*, and define it as a long-lasting compensatory emotional mechanism, triggered by envy, shame, or inefficacious anger, all involving a sense of self-reproaching victimhood. Unlike the short-lived character of anger, *ressentiment* has a lasting impact on the individual, as it involves a transvaluation of the self and its values. It is inefficacious and vengeful, it employs defenses, and it is dynamic: It transmutes lacerating emotions like envy, shame, and inefficacious anger into outcome emotions of moral anger (as resentment, when felt about personal wrongs towards one’s self or one’s people with the desire for personal revenge; or as indignation, when felt about impersonal wrongs with the desire to see wrongs righted by a third-party punishment; see Aeschbach, 2017, pp. 30–37) and hatred, displaying a morally superior victim position.

While resentment as moral anger can emerge on its own or through *ressentiment*, it is important to observe differences in the intentional targets and action tendencies between these two types of resentment. The first type of resentment is moral anger at injustices and wrongs that motivates individual or collective action seeking to correct or retribute the relevant injustice or wrongdoing. This high action readiness associates the first type of resentment with anger-proper. The second type of resentment resulting from *ressentiment* is more complex as it is generated from repressed shame, envy, or humiliation, which are intolerable for the self (Lewis, 1971; Scheff, 1994; Scheler, 1915/1961; Turner, 2007). Therefore, resentment mediated by *ressentiment* has an indeterminate and “blurred” affective focus on generic “enemies” of the self (cf. Szanto, 2018) that allows its targeting to various scapegoats in political rhetoric (Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Furthermore, the resentment felt via *ressentiment* is not an active emotion of protest associated with anger-proper (Jasper, 2014; Salmela & von Scheve, 2018). It is inefficacious, closer to revenge “taken on the object in thought rather than in action” (Nietzsche in Hoggett, 2018, p. 394; Scheler, 1915/1961). In their collective political expressions, the transition

from *ressentiment* to anger-proper can be transformative. As Kiss (2021) notes, when political leaders and institutions function as discharge mechanisms, grievance politics of *ressentiment* can be transformed into anger, changing society from passive to active.

Theoretical accounts of *ressentiment* highlight the role of envy, shame, and inefficacious anger as its trigger emotions. In addition, they recognize the central role of victimhood, powerlessness, the process of transvaluation, and a strong sense of destiny (Aeschbach, 2017; Salmela & Capelos, 2021). Phenomenological and macro-historical sociological approaches (Demertzis, 2006; Ferro, 2010; Moruno, 2013; Scheler, 1915/1961; Szanto & Slaby, 2020) and empirical studies on *ressentiment* focus on victimhood, envy, powerlessness, destiny, and transvaluation as its key markers to distinguish it from anger proper. León et al. (1988) created a 28-item survey scale with items measuring envy, victimhood, indignation, powerlessness, sense of injustice, and destiny. Capelos and Demertzis (2022) used a shortened six-item version of this scale, while Capelos and Demertzis (2018) relied on a proxy measure which combined anger, anxiety, and low political efficacy.

One shortcoming of extant measures of *ressentiment* is that they are static, while emotional mechanisms are dynamic. Salmela and Capelos (2021) proposed the empirical measurement of *ressentiment* via the observation of defenses alongside its key markers and highlighted the value of the defenses of *reaction formation* (as the exaggerated opposition and preoccupation with the object of desire), *splitting* (the world is all good/the world is all bad; I am all good/the other is all bad), *denial of facts* (refusal to accept reality), *projection* (bad elements of the self are projected out), *introjection* (good elements of external objects are incorporated with the self), and *mirroring/idealization* (strong identification with the other as a mirror to oneself). While defenses operate at the level of individual psychology, they are supported and reinforced by public discourses in traditional and social media by opinion leaders and political entrepreneurs whose affective rhetoric contributes to the transvaluation process (Kazlauskaitė & Salmela, 2021). The use of defenses as proxies of *ressentiment* can therefore apply to individual and group level studies.

*Ressentiment* can also be identified through its outcome emotions. As the “new-self” with its “new values” seeks validation through social sharing with peer-others (consolidating stage) the hostile outcome emotions, hatred and moral anger (resentment, indignation), typically directed towards concrete objects, such as other persons or groups, transform (through their lasting reliving and repression) into an objectless hostile sentiment, easily re-attached to any target, from immigrants and religious groups to government, leaders, elites, or political parties (Aeschbach, 2017; Leiter, 2014; Salmela & Capelos, 2021; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). This is where *ressentiment* meets negative affectivity (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018) and can be conflated with anger

proper. They have however two important differences: The generalized toxic target-emotionality of *ressentiment* is perceived as morally *righteous* (Salmela & Capelos, 2021), and it is shared with one's peers as an "antagonistic affective attachment" between the individual and the target of *ressentiment* (Szanto & Slaby, 2020, p. 15).

The expression of *ressentiment* in grievance politics goes beyond anger proper, and is linked to victimhood, powerlessness, inefficacy, and inaction (Capelos et al., 2021; Salmela & Capelos, 2021). Individuals in *ressentiment* display morally righteous indignation which gives rise to "victimological collectives" (Sloterdijk, 2010, p. 152) but will not actively engage in democratic participatory acts or collective actions (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018; Hoggett, 2018; Salmela & Capelos, 2021). As if the present is not worth engaging in, and the future is distantly disconnected from their grievances, individuals in *ressentiment* remain attached to nostalgic accounts of the past. Their bitterness is expressed as dogmatic, binary anti-preferences, sustained through lasting rumination over remembered or imagined injustices (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018). When populist and authoritarian leaders co-opt bitter and retrogressive/nostalgic narratives and agendas, *ressentiment* becomes politically relevant (Capelos et al., 2021). Studying the psychology of *ressentiment* allows us to recognize how past or present perceived injustices are gradually internalized by individuals or collectives as if these were a constituent part of their identity making them special (Adler, 2013). In *ressentiment*, nostalgia does not simply denote "a longing for a home that no longer exists" (Boym, 2001, as cited in Reynolds, 2004, p. 2). *Ressentimentful* nostalgia is bitter. It manifests as grievance projected on out-groups and results in anti-stances including anti-feminist, anti-immigration, anti-globalization, anti-science, anti-elite, and anti-EU positions (Capelos & Katsanidou, 2018; Capelos et al., 2017; Ciulla, 2020; Sullivan, 2021).

The nuanced psychological composition and behavioral expressions of anger proper and *ressentiment* justify their conceptual and empirical differentiation. While telling them apart is not an easy task, we rely on strong theoretical insights to generate distinct markers for each concept: (a) Anger proper and *ressentiment* can share a sense of injustice, but, contrary to anger proper, *ressentiment* is inefficacious and passive and is tapped through markers not applicable to anger: moral victimhood, envy, powerlessness, destiny, and transvaluation; (b) *ressentiment* involves defenses of projection, introjection, splitting, denial, and reaction formation, whereas anger has no theorized relationship with defenses; (c) *ressentiment* is marked by inefficacy, inaction, and anti-preferences. Anger proper, occurring outside the emotional mechanism of *ressentiment*, would not display these markers to the same degree and as consistently.

We expect that what is often perceived as "anger" against political elites, the establishment, and "enemy others," will have a *ressentimentful* core. We employ

an empirical plausibility probe to establish the validity of this expectation. A plausibility probe is a stage of empirical inquiry preliminary to testing, which examines the plausibility of a theory. Empirical plausibility probes adopt suggestive tests, do not require large representative samples, and establish whether a theoretical construct is worth considering, without providing exact estimates of probability (Eckstein, 1992).

### 3. Empirical Plausibility Probe

Our empirical plausibility probe involves qualitative and quantitative content analysis (Burla et al., 2008; Green et al., 2007; Rourke & Anderson, 2004; Schreier, 2014; Vaismoradi et al., 2016) of 164 excerpts from interviews with "angry" citizens in the US. We sourced interview excerpts from three books focusing on contemporary expressions of anger in politics: *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era* by Kimmel (2017), *Strangers in Their Own Land* by Hochschild (2016), and *Stiffed: The Roots of Modern Male Rage* by Faludi (2019). Kimmel (2017, p. 9) discusses "the rage of the American 'every-man'" focusing on middle-class men and the sources as well as objects of their anger. Hochschild (2016) investigates the right-wing supporters' stance towards American politics in Louisiana. Faludi (2019) discusses how rising challenges to the traditional understanding of masculinity in the late 1990s led not only to gender wars but also to accumulated anger which can still be felt in contemporary America.

The books contain interviews collected in the US and address anger in relation to issues in the private, public, and political realms with middle-class citizens, Tea Party activists, Trump's supporters, white supremacists, fathers' rights activists, Promise Keepers, and others. The authors identify negative affect in the interviews as evidence of anger. Because *ressentiment* was not on the analytical radar of the authors, they did not address it or probe for it in the interviews, making the analysis of the interview excerpts a hard empirical case for the identification of *ressentiment*.

We expected evidence of anger proper and coded for consistent and inconsistent markers. Kimmel (2017, p. 38) briefly refers to *ressentiment* as an emotion of "creative hatred" but does not theorize further. Hochschild (2016, pp. 115, 135, 147, 212) references resentment (not *ressentiment*), specifically the impact of class conflict as the source of resentment in "the American right," considering resentment alongside other emotions (fear, pride, shame, hope, anxiety) to elaborate on the affective experiences of Tea Party activists. The emotional mechanism of *ressentiment* is not explored, but what Hochschild discusses as resentment shares the key markers of *ressentiment*.

Our unit of analysis is each of the 164 excerpts of interviews offered in these books as examples of anger. From all cited interview material, we selected the statements with explicit and implicit mentions of negative

affect. If the text did not contain references to negative affect, we omitted it. Of the 164 negative affect statements (NAS), 71 were drawn from *Angry White Men*, 67 were from *Stiffed*, and 26 were from *Strangers in Their Own Land* (details of the NAS case extraction in Table A1 in Appendix A of the Supplementary File). The number of words varied between 7 and 219 (mean 52). The 164 NAS were made by 108 individuals (1–7 NAS/individual). Most individuals made one statement (86%, 82 of 108). The gender breakdown was 94 men (87%), 12 women (11%), and two (2%) whose gender was not identified. The gender imbalance in our sample is linked to the themes of two of the three books (frustrated masculinities). The topic itself provides a fertile ground to study expressions of anger. It is therefore not surprising it was chosen by the authors, nor is it surprising that the majority of interview subjects were men. We discuss the implications of this in our conclusion.

### 3.1. Operationalization and Coding

We coded each NAS for instances of anger proper, efficacy, and support for political action, markers of anger in the literature, and non-anger-related measures of *ressentiment*, defenses, inefficacy, inaction, and anti-preferences (coding examples in Tables B1–B4 in Appendix B of the Supplementary File). We applied qualitative content analysis to determine the explicit and implicit meaning of selected texts (Schreier, 2014). To eliminate potential coder bias, intercoder reliability was established across three independent coders on a sample of 10 statements based on 34 key variables. Once satisfactory intercoder reliability was reached (90% agreement across coders), the remaining statements were coded by one coder (Burla et al., 2008).

Anger proper was identified through discrete words like “anger,” “rage,” and “enraged,” and expletives indicating angry frustration, like “screwed.” *Ressentiment* was identified by six items adapted from Capelos and Demertzis (2022): *envy* (others do better with less effort), *victimhood* (others take advantage of me), *transvaluation* (reversal of value, from important to unimportant, good to bad), *injustice* (what is happening to me is unfair), *powerlessness* (I feel disrespected), and *destiny* (my hopes will never come true). Except for injustice, which can be an element present in anger, these markers map *ressentiment* and are not consistent with the psychological experience of anger proper.

We coded defenses of *projection* (what is considered bad in the self is projected outwards to another), *introjection* (what is good in the outside world is introjected in the self), *splitting* (oversimplifying reality by splitting the world in all-good and all-bad objects), *denial of facts* (a negation of painful reality), and *reaction formation* (repression of the original affect/desire with the exaggeration of the opposite, like “I am not sad, I am elated”). These defenses are not markers of anger proper but are prominent in *ressentiment*. Coding for defenses is notori-

ously difficult and scale inventories and deep psychoanalytic techniques acknowledge measurement validity and reliability issues (Soroko, 2014). We consulted validated defenses inventories and studies that identify defenses in interview and narration material (see Hentschel et al., 1993). We recognize that our coding approximates rather than clinically measures these primarily unconscious psychological strategies.

Action tendency (expected high for anger, low for *ressentiment*), was measured as support for action, dormant action (I would support this), and inaction. Efficacy (high for anger, low for *ressentiment*) was measured as a dichotomous yes/no variable of whether individuals stated they were able to influence the event they talked about. Action type recorded whether actions were legal or outside mainstream politics (illegal/violent). To tap into grievance politics, we coded for mentions of anti-preferences (anti-feminist, anti-government, anti-immigration, anti-democracy) and nostalgic thinking.

## 4. Analysis

To examine the prevalence of anger vs. *ressentiment*, we compared the frequency of anger and *ressentiment* markers across all NAS and between a smaller sample of HighR (16 NAS containing four or more *ressentiment* markers), and NoR (28 NAS with no *ressentiment* markers). To understand whether grievance politics was discussed in NAS through anger or *ressentiment*, we looked at the frequencies of inefficacy, inaction, nostalgia, and anti-preferences in the HighR and NoR NAS. Because our empirical framework was designed for the secondary analysis of interview excerpts, we provide quantitative tallies of markers of anger proper vs. *ressentiment* and make modest use of the excerpts in the text. We are not able to make extensive use of qualitative content, as we would have in the case of original interview material because we could not probe deeper into the original interviewee’s answers. To highlight the rich content of the excerpts and the value for further research, we complement the analyses with relevant excerpts in Tables C1–C5 in Appendix C of the Supplementary File.

### 4.1. In the Deep: The Emotional Mechanism of *Ressentiment* and Its Defenses

Across the 164 NAS, only 28 (17%) did not mention victimhood, envy, transvaluation, injustice, powerlessness, or destiny, and 136 (83%) contained one or more of these *ressentiment* markers. Instead of finding mainly language consistent with anger proper in NAS, we counted in total 313 *ressentiment* references which empirically seemed out of place (except injustice) if these individuals were just angry. NAS often contained combinations of *ressentiment* markers: 46 statements (28%) had two, 40 (24%) combined three, 13 (8%) combined four, and three (2%) combined five markers, while 34 (21%) had one marker.

Turning to anger proper, it was present in NAS but less frequently than we expected (84 anger mentions in 164 statements). We also identified only 10 NAS (6%) where anger was present without *ressentiment* (NoR), and 18 NAS (11%) with negative affect which was neither anger nor *ressentiment* (“If I know a person is a Christian, I know we have a lot in common. I’m more likely to trust that he or she is a moral person than I would a non-Christian,” NAS 95, pointing to *distrust*).

Injustice, the common link of anger proper and *ressentiment*, was in 12 NAS (4%). The other five markers, properties of *ressentiment* but not of anger proper, were more frequent: Victimhood appeared 116 times (37%), followed by envy (70; 22%), powerlessness (60; 19%), and destiny (42; 13%). Transvaluation was less frequent (13 NAS, 4%) because despite being an important process in *ressentiment*, it is difficult to detect with single-time measures. Understood as the change of value labels over time, transvaluation is often non-conscious and a bad candidate for self-report data. Taken together, the frequent mentions of victimhood, envy, powerlessness, and destiny pointed to a high volume of *ressentiment*, contradicting the expectation that NAS mainly expressed anger proper.

Defenses are expected in *ressentiment* but not in anger proper. We identified 45 NAS (27%) containing a total of 55 mentions of defenses. The most frequently mentioned were projection (19 mentions; 35%) and splitting (17; 31%). Denial (eight; 15%), introjection (six; 11%), and reaction formation (five; 9%) were less frequent. It is logical to anticipate higher frequency of defenses in high *ressentiment* NAS compared to low *ressentiment* NAS. The 16 HighR NAS contained more frequent splitting (38%) and projection (13%) compared to the 28 NoR NAS, which showed no splitting (0%), and projection in 11%.

To further examine the theorized link between *ressentiment* and defenses, we examined the *ressentiment* markers present in the defense-containing NAS. We expected core *ressentiment* markers (victimhood, envy, powerlessness) to appear more frequently than injustice which is shared with anger proper. The solid bars in Figure 1 show the totals of *ressentiment* markers across defenses. We see splitting (in orange) and projection (in blue) containing the most *ressentiment* markers, 51 and 45 respectively, confirming the link between *ressentiment* and defenses. The first bar cluster in Figure 1 (in black) shows how inexplicably linked are defenses with the *ressentiment* markers, particularly victimhood (horizontal stripes bar), envy (diagonal upward stripes bar), and powerlessness (diagonal downward stripes). Characteristically, victimhood appeared 47 times in NAS with defenses, envy 35 times, and powerlessness 31 times. These flagship *ressentiment* markers were the most prominently featured compared to the sparse mention of injustice (small grid bar) and transvaluation (dotted bar) in NAS-containing defenses. As injustice is a shared marker of anger, we did not expect to see it frequently with defenses. Transvaluation was very

rarely identified in our data overall (see Table D1 in the Supplementary File).

#### 4.2. The Muted and Bitter Voice of Resentiment: Inefficacy, Inaction, Anti-Preferences, and Nostalgia

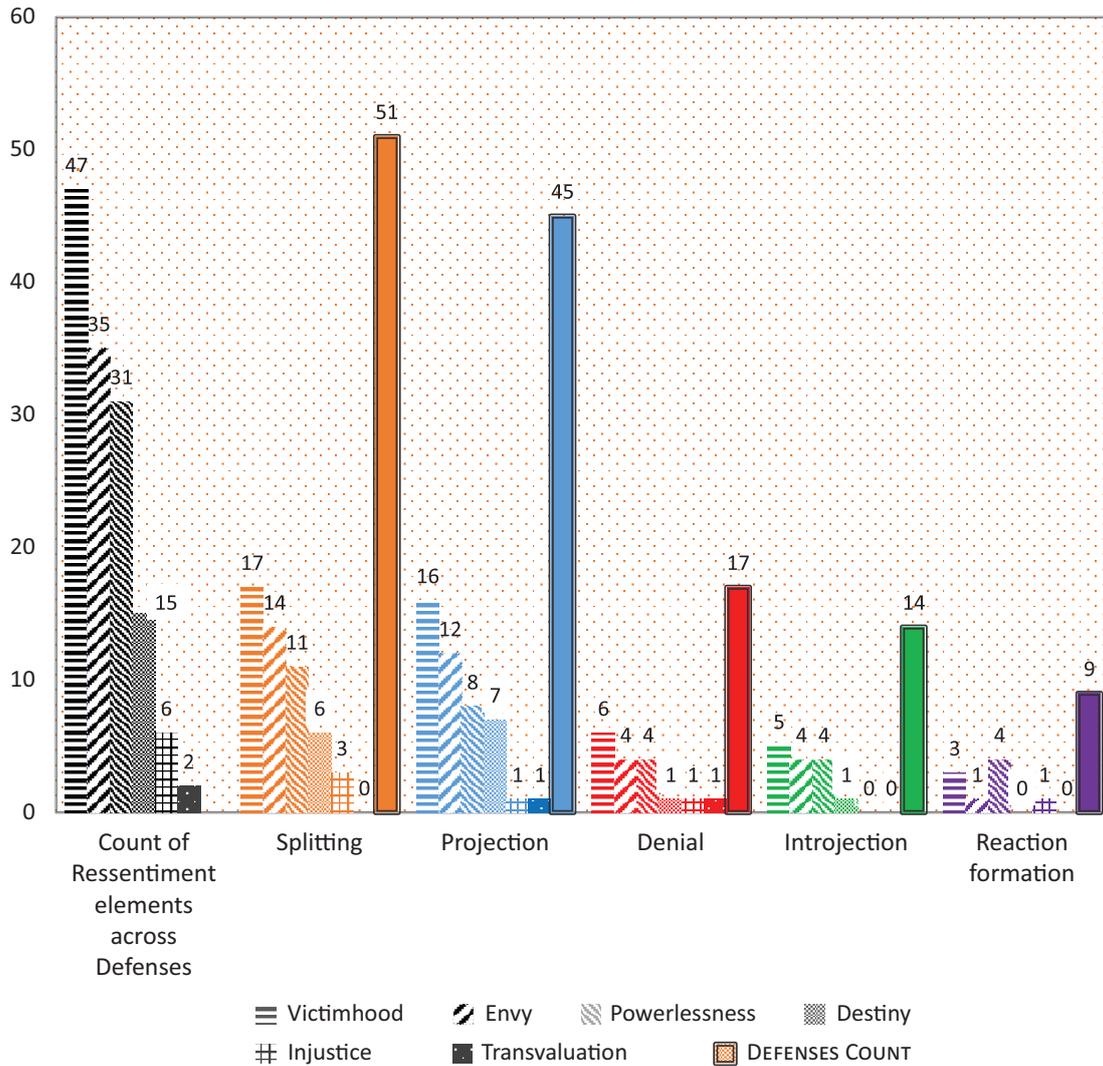
Because *ressentiment* originates from inefficacious anger, we expected inefficacy in the 16 HighR NAS. Indeed, 12 (75%) contained inefficacy alongside mentions of destiny, victimhood, powerlessness, and envy. For example, NAS10 notes: “The inmates are running the asylum. They’re completely in power, and they get anything they want. And us regular, normal white guys—We’re like nothing. We don’t count for shit anymore.” NAS68 also expressed inefficacy in the words: “It’s like we’re nothing....No one listens to the little guy.” Characteristically none of the HighR NAS mentioned efficacy. However, among the 28 NoR statements, 10 (36%) mentioned efficacy and there were no mentions of inefficacy. An example was NAS125 which reads: “I want to get control of the world. Well, not the world, but I want to get where they see me because I’m on top, where all heads turn when they say my name.”

*Resentiment* is passive (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018) and as we expected references to political action were sparse. About 75% of HighR NAS denoted inaction, compared to 61% of NoR NAS. Instead, action was more frequent in NoR NAS (25%) compared to HighR NAS (19%), and was often associated with injustice. This is not surprising given that action is a tendency associated with anger proper which is often a response to a perceived injustice. For example, NAS109 shows action by noting: “All we black union men went to crying because we knew what was going to happen, except for me. When I heard they intended to fire me, I quit before they could.”

What we found most interesting was that the inefficacious anger of *ressentiment* was delivered through support for dormant action, which appeared in statements alongside envy and victimhood. The combination of these markers comes through clearly in excerpts like NAS69:

It is our RACE we must preserve, not just one class....White power means a permanent end to unemployment because, with the non-whites gone, the labor market will no longer be over-crowded with unproductive niggers, spics and other racial low-life. It means an end to inflation eating up a man’s paycheck faster than he can raise it because the economy will not be run by OUR criminal pack of international Jewish bankers, bent on using the white worker’s tax money in selfish and even destructive schemes.

Anti-preferences can signal political frustration expressed as anger, and grievance expressed through *ressentiment*. Across the 164 NAS, 82 contained anti-preferences, targeting women, immigrants (e.g., black, Hispanic, and Muslim), and the government.



**Figure 1.** *Ressentiment* and defenses. Notes: Clustered bars show crosstabulations of *ressentiment* markers by defense; the colored bars show counts of resentment markets; the first bar cluster (in black) shows counts across defenses, the second bar cluster (in orange) shows counts in splitting, the third bar cluster (in blue) shows counts in projection, the fourth bar cluster (in red) shows counts in denial, the fifth bar cluster (in green) shows counts in introjection, the sixth bar cluster (in purple) shows counts in reaction formation; patterned bars show the markers of *ressentiment* and solid bars show total counts of resentment markers per defense.

Anti-preferences were more frequent in HighR (69%) compared to NoR (46%) NAS. An example of a HighR NAS with anti-immigration, anti-elite, and anti-black references appears in NAS1:

I mean, just look around. There’s illegals everywhere. There’s Wall Street screwing everybody. And now there’s a goddamn.... Oh, fuck it, I don’t care if it is politically incorrect. We got a fucking nigger in the White House.

In NAS21, the attack is against feminists:

The misandric zeitgeist, the system of feminist governance that most are still loath to acknowledge is about to head toward its inevitable and ugly conclu-

sion, and the results of that will inflict another deep wound on the psyche of the western world.

We also identified 15 references to nostalgia (9%), featuring destiny and sadness for what appears lost. In NAS5, nostalgia is evident in the words: “I liked it the way it was....It’s not going to be like that anymore.” Another example of nostalgia in NAS57 reads: “Back in the day, if you got screwed by your company, you could go to the government, get unemployment, get food stamps, whatever, get some help. Now there’s nowhere to go.” One more example of longing for the past in NAS72 reads: “When I was a kid, you stuck a thumb out by the side of the road, you got a ride. Or if you had a car, you gave a ride. If someone was hungry, you fed him. You had community.” These seemingly happy memories of

the abandoned heartland are bitter-sweet, laced with grievance and frustration. Unlike the “Make America Great Again” uplifting accounts of populist rhetoric, these *resentimentful* recountings imply a lost past which does not come with restoration and is unlikely to return (Sullivan, 2021).

## 5. Discussion

After finding 83% of NAS containing *resentiment* markers which were inconsistent with anger proper, we examined the excerpts’ psychological content. The prevalence of victimhood came as no surprise, considering the harsh realities of those who talked about losing their jobs, being divorced, being “forced” to pay alimony or feeling betrayed by the government. The content of their statements was determined largely by the context of their life experiences. Expert accounts of *resentiment* suggest individuals experience “the sacralization of victimhood” (Demertzis, 2017, p. 12), and can get “stuck” in their victimhood status, rather than striving to remove the underlying injustice. In these excerpts, powerlessness was blended with victimhood and the feeling of injustice as destiny, which precludes anything from being done (Demertzis, 2020; Hoggett, 2018; Salmela & Capelos, 2021).

Recognizing the important problem of mistaking *resentiment* for anger proper, we mapped the defenses it employs, thereby also expanding its instruments. We identified examples of splitting the world into “all-good vs. all-bad”: For example, the goodness of one’s in-group was defined in contrast to an all-bad out-group. Projection (NAS120, “Girls have all the power”), when coupled with *resentiment*, focused on victimhood, in line with the moral expression of *righteous* victimhood in *resentiment* (Hoggett, 2018). Introjection (NAS42, “The knowledge accumulated by men in the ages”) also focused on victimhood, which shows that introjection works in feedback loops with projection to reinforce victimhood perceptions (Salmela & Capelos, 2021).

Turning to the political implications of negative affectivity, we examined the theorized link between *resentiment* and anti-preferences. As expected, the object of *resentiment* was generalized (Aeschbach, 2017; Salmela & Capelos, 2021), displaced onto one or more “enemy-other(s),” and nostalgia was mostly a hopeless gaze to the past (NAS87, “My grandfather homesteaded those 40 acres before anybody even knew what a refinery was.... It’s all killed now. It makes me not want to live in Bayou d’Inde and makes me sad”). Our analysis of efficacy yielded results consistent with theoretical accounts: HighR NAS, particularly those featuring destiny, mentioned inefficacy and inaction, aligning with Capelos and Demertzis’ (2018) findings of *resentiment* being inefficient and passive.

Reflecting on our empirical framework, using excerpts of secondary interview material had benefits and drawbacks. We find value in our approach, as it allows the

identification of key concepts while avoiding researcher biases related to collecting primary material. Our method is in this sense closer to document and text analysis rather than primary interviews. This comes with limitations: The books we sourced focused primarily on anger and did not aim to uncover *resentiment*. As a result, the excerpts were not as rich as they might have been if interviews were dedicated to the exploration of *resentiment* (Hox & Boeije, 2005; Salmela & Capelos, 2021).

Our analysis confirmed how notoriously difficult it is to capture transvaluation with static data (Demertzis, 2020; Hoggett, 2018; Salmela & Capelos, 2021). The muted transformation of one’s values and one’s sense of self would be more easily discernible through longitudinal data, recording over-time shifts of the values of the self and the objects of *resentiment*, or through in-depth analysis of qualitative interviews and focus group material where participants elaborate on value changes.

Quantitative measures allow the systematic and parsimonious study of complex phenomena through a relatively small number of indicators. Here we attempted to capture the complex psychological footprint of *resentiment* with markers tapping on its core drivers, the defenses it employs, and its outcome emotions and experiences. An important assumption when doing this work is that the transformation of emotions and values in *resentiment* remains unfinished, and therefore driver and outcome emotions are perceivable in the expressions of persons in *resentiment* (Demertzis, 2020; Salmela & Capelos, 2021). A natural extension is to apply our coding frame to primary interviews and focus group material. This would move the unit of analysis from statements to individuals and groups, opening opportunities for follow-up questions, and the study of non-verbal cues, providing deep meaning through the observation of silences, facial expressions, and body language (Ekman, 2004).

The excerpts we analyzed reflected the experiences of individuals living in the US, the majority of whom were men. Of course, this sample cannot capture the complexity of *resentiment* in the West, let alone Eastern European states, or states of the Global South. Our findings point to the socially and politically established link between masculinity and anger: Men traditionally express their anger outward and discuss topics they find frustrating, whereas women suppress it, direct it inwards, or sublimate it (Thomas, 2003). As the examination of gender-based and minority differences and similarities is gaining scholarly attention (Kisić Merino et al., 2021; Negra & Leyda, 2021; Phoenix, 2019), collecting geographically and historically diverse material, sampling women and minorities, would advance this line of work.

## 6. Conclusion

Our take-home point is that anger-focused interpretations of societal dissatisfaction and political grievance can often conceal *resentiment*, particularly when

individuals feel entitled, yet excluded from a way of life, job, or privileges. This distinction between anger proper and *ressentiment* has significant implications for political life. In *ressentiment*, individuals lack the agency of their angry counterparts. Their inability to publicly express and/or act on their inefficacious anger, envy, or shame, can be very painful and sets forth defenses, fostering rumination and political inaction. Scholars of *ressentiment* are familiar with the original Latin meaning of the term “*re-sentire*,” to “re-feel” time after time (Hoggett, 2018, p. 395). The other-targeting negative emotions like hatred, resentment, and hostility generated by *ressentiment* promote polarized political preferences and noxious behaviors (Capelos & Demertzis, 2018, 2022).

Studies agree on the *inputs* of grievance politics: The crisis-laced rhetoric of populist parties and the emotional experiences of voters supporting them are rife with aversive affectivity expressed as anger, discontent, pessimism, insecurity, anxiety, blame, and distrust (Betz, 1993; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018; Rico et al., 2017). Elaborating on the psychology of anger vs. *ressentiment* invites the study of emotional mechanisms shaping the political outputs of grievance politics across Western and non-Western populist, nationalist, and authoritarian contexts (Kisić Merino et al., 2021; Sharafutdinova, 2020). The appeal of such rhetoric and narratives, particularly on the far-right, feeds and grows through subjective and intersubjective perceptions of threat and vulnerability (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017). Crucially, the outputs of grievance in *ressentiment* are not the outputs of grievance in anger. The long-lasting anti-social, vengeful, moral victimhood of *ressentiment* is distinct from the collective action potential of anger generated by social sharing of frustrations and disaffections (Salmela & von Scheve, 2018).

The implications travel further than contemporary populist politics. *Ressentiment* can be seen as a universal feature of human beings because “inferiority feelings are to some degree common to all of us since we all find ourselves in positions which we wish to improve” (Adler, 2013, p. 257). Its intensity, however, is not just an individual affair, but also a function of social structures (Scheler, 1915/1961, pp. 7–8) and dominant ideologies, such as competitive individualism (Sandel, 2020). According to Winnicott (1950, p. 176), in troubled societies, members perceive “the external scene in terms of their own internal struggle, and (they) temporarily allow their internal struggle to be waged in terms of the external political scene.” This is how *ressentiment* moves from private to public consciousness and back, particularly in societies where collective problems—social injustice, economic insecurity, corruption of institutions—are perceived, and often framed in individualistic terms (Yankelovich, 1975). Recognizing the mental pain of *ressentiment* and seeking socially-minded approaches to alleviate it, are pressing challenges for public policy officials and scholars of volatile and antagonistic grievance politics.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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