

From Brexit to Trump: Why mobilising anger in a constructive way is now one of the key challenges in modern politics

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*The UK's decision to leave the European Union has generated an intense political reaction, but arguably just as important is the emotional reaction from supporters on both sides of the debate. **Sonja Avlijaš** discusses the role that anger has played in the EU referendum and other political issues across the world, such as the presidential campaign of Donald Trump in the United States. Drawing on the work of the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, she reasons that rather than ignoring anger and protests, we should instead seek to transform anger into generosity and concern for the welfare of all of us.*



Following Brexit, anger is palpable and omnipresent. Scrolling through Twitter as I write this, I find countless examples of anger on social media: Brexit was a cry of *anger* and frustration, *anger* of those left behind by globalisation, working-class *anger*, nationalist *anger*, Europeans in the UK are *angry*, *anger* at the European Parliament, *anger* produces unusual alliances...

Those disillusioned because of the Leave vote are angry too. Their anger is leading them to question and delegitimise the democratic process: This should have been a qualified majority vote; the UK cannot leave if some of its regions are against it; the over 65 year-olds and the uneducated got us into this predicament; it is not legal to base a political campaign on lies.

In short, anger matters. Our elites have been in denial on the role that the human experience and the emotions associated with it play in the political process. Technocrats and economists have been calmly trying to fix the euro while Greece has been facing a humanitarian catastrophe. The Silicon Valley techies are looking to end human mortality and build life on Mars, while the Bay area is facing a severe crisis of homelessness.



Supporters of Donald Trump at a campaign rally at the South Point Arena in Las Vegas, Nevada. Gage Skidmore / Flickr.

This twisted ambition to perfect the future human experience shows great intolerance towards accepting humanity as it is today, in all its imperfections. This imperfection is reflected in our mortality and our inability to predict the future or control uncertainty and a whole spectrum of good and bad emotions that arise from that predicament. Walter Weisskopf [argued](#) in the 1950s that neoclassical economics has the same psychological effect as valium – it is meant to soothe the human anxiety that stems from our inability to topple uncertainty by telling us that the world can be controlled and predictable. I would dare to extend the same diagnosis to the ongoing hi-tech revolution.

This aspiration to build a utopia where uncertainty and irrationality do not exist is in resolute tension with an overflow of emotions that is flooding the world on all fronts. Expert communities which are critical for our economic prosperity are displaying a complete inability to process a healthy range of human emotions and integrate them into the economic and political processes. People are expected to attain the Enlightenment ideal of rationality by eliminating or numbing down their emotions, especially the negative ones.

But that strips people of their humanity, with all the satisfaction and pain it brings, so people resist. Emotions are everything but being contained. And legitimately so, because the situation for many has become so dire that the discussion is no longer about unequal opportunities *within* the capitalist market place, but about the outright [expulsion](#) of certain groups from the market.

In the case of the United States, the events associated with the housing crisis have qualified as [racial banishment](#) rather than 'simple' displacement of the marginalised. Furthermore, the extreme right is on the rise in Europe through legitimate democratic practices and people are supporting Donald Trump as the Republican presidential candidate in the United States. Without the platform where emotions can be legitimised, they become bloodthirsty and turn into self-destructive anger which gets expressed through democratic procedures such as referendums and elections, as the only public platforms where it has a chance to be heard.

Democracy and anger

In her recent book, [Anger and Forgiveness](#), the philosopher Martha Nussbaum examines the role of anger in the political realm. She analyses the Greek tragic trilogy *Oresteia* and describes how in the third play, *Eumenides*, Athena introduces legal institutions in order for the law to resolve guilt instead of the Furies, the ancient goddesses of revenge. Yet, the Furies are not simply dismissed, they are given a place of honour, in a reminder that “the legal system must incorporate the dark vindictive passions and honor them” (p.76).

The Furies accept Athena's offer and because of this integration into the political system, they change their roles by assuming a gentler temper and becoming the Eumenides (i.e. The Kindly Ones). According to Nussbaum, *Eumenides* teaches us that political justice does not simply confine anger, but that it profoundly and intentionally transforms it from something inhumane, compulsive and ferocious to something human, reasonable and calm. But in order for that to take place, anger needs to be acknowledged and included into the project of political justice. This is done by moving away from dwelling on a past that cannot be altered and by focusing on the creation of future welfare and prosperity. The focus thus shifts from payback to deterrence.

What implications does this story have for our current political climate? Has the reversion of the Eumenides back to Furies happened because of the failure of our political institutions to honour anger and supply justice? Have the policy makers and expert communities expelled the Furies from the political process by continually turning a blind eye to the painful reality of daily struggles and the anger associated with it?

The *Oresteia* contains another powerful message: The idea that political justice requires angry emotions to guide it is wrong. Nussbaum warns us about the destructive power of anger and its uselessness for the political process. Yet, she also underlines the importance of recognising and legitimising anger as part of the political process and then focusing on transforming it towards future welfare. If we try to ignore it or rise above it, it will come back to hound us.

She reminds us that democracy requires a certain degree of vulnerability and the acceptance of the fact that our destiny is interdependent with that of others, even those that are different and those that disagree with us. A healthy society encourages people to feel comfortable with such vulnerability by encouraging social trust. Therefore, trust, which starts with acknowledging the emotions of one's compatriots, needs to be a key concern of any decent society.

Nussbaum brings up the example of Martin Luther King, Jr. who saw anger as an impediment to the pursuit of justice because it blocked the empathy and generosity needed to build justice. A further example is the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#) in South Africa, which has focused on moving beyond the drama of anger and forgiveness toward the expression of shared values and a construction of attitudes that support trust and reconciliation such as generosity, justice and truth. The focus of the most constructive and powerful social movements historically has been on generous forward looking thoughts rather than on anger.

We need to recognise that it is not possible to banish human emotion from the economic or political experiences and challenges we face. If we want a healthy democracy, we need to cultivate it and show concern for all citizens in order to transition from anger to constructive thinking about future welfare. The focus needs to be on the prevention of 'democratic wrongdoing' via greater social prosperity, the reduction of poverty and illness and the inclusion of all citizens. We need to transform anger into generosity and concern for the welfare of all of us in order to deter future anger. That is the only way that democracy can be re-legitimised and redeemed. What we reap is what we sow.

This article first appeared at the [LSE's EUROPPE blog](#).

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