

THE RETURN OF RAGE

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Emotions are popular again.¹ However, while there have been discussions of emotions ranging from humiliation, guilt, and anxiety to love or sympathy, rage has received only marginal attention. This is rather surprising, given that rage is one of the most apparent psychopolitical driving forces in conflicts on the personal, national and international stages. It might be argued that the vengeful part of the affective life of political actors has been neglected because it is, by definition, anti-deliberative and anti-egalitarian. If X is furious about Y, she does not care for equal treatment or reasoning directed toward mutual understanding. Rage thus undermines the normative pillars of contemporary political theory.

For the present purpose I would like to pursue the question, if it is possible to construct a viable theoretical paradigm that draws on the psychopolitical category of rage and related concepts such as indignation, wrath, and anger.² Plato already argued that only a political system that could successfully balance the accumulating, receptive, erotic, on the one hand, and the giving, explosive and what he calls “*thymotic*” dimensions of communal life, on the other hand, would provide for a just society. Recently, the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, who became known to a wider audience through his *Critique of Cynical Reason*³ and his 1999 quarrel with Habermas concerning the ethics of human engineering, attempted to rehabilitate rage as a central political category. In his treatise *Zorn und Zeit* (‘Rage and Time’, an allusion to Heidegger’s *Being and Time*), Sloterdijk proposes to reread the history of civilization as well as contemporary political developments as attempts to balance the vengeful and the caring dimensions of social interaction. This paper discusses Sloterdijk’s proposal to introduce rage as a central psychopolitical category and at the same time pursues the systematic question whether this proposal can be extended into a political theory that is empirically plausible and normatively convincing. The guiding hypothesis is that a politics of caring for the worst-off without vengeful contours is empty, while rage without a vision of a better society is blind.

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A rehabilitation of rage as a political concept is all but an easy and, even less so, self-evident endeavor. It is almost a truism that rage destroys rather than creates environments in which human beings and communities could flourish. Philosophical calls to a politics of rage, one would think, is the last thing we need at times in which we are only slowly recovering from a rampant war rhetoric that too easily distinguished friend from foe, those who are with from those who are against us. Nonetheless, there remains the question how we should relate to that force which the ancient Greeks referred to as “*thymos*.”

If the 20th century has taught us one thing than it is that using strong negative emotions to manipulate masses is one of the most dangerous arts of governing. Accordingly, we might think that it is the role of the responsible philosopher to warn against these dangers. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has made a career out of defending reason in the form of the forceless force of the better argument against the “dark” *thymotic* forces that threaten the project of modernity.⁴ Amongst other things, Peter Sloterdijk’s *Rage and Time* helps to critically reconsider the adequacy of such deliberative models of political interaction.⁵

To take rage politics seriously requires us to break with three pillars of contemporary social and political theorizing:⁶ First, it is necessary to refrain from constructing an idealized theory of the good, the just, the virtues, or virtuous affects. Rather than clearly separating the normative wheat from the pathological chaff, the possibility of making such clear-cut distinctions needs to be called into question in order to come to terms with the complexity and normative ambivalence of emotions and their expressions in political life. Second, in line with the critique of ideal theory, the focus on the neglected concept of rage helps to reinterpret and better understand recent historical developments from a global perspective. Global terrorism as well as the reaction of a war on terror mark not just the return of history but also the return of rage as a political emotion. They call for a different form of political theory than the proponents of cosmopolitanism and rights—or justice-centered accounts are able to offer. Third, in order to develop a viable alternative to current idealizing political theories, it is necessary to think about ways of reorienting the theoretical underpinnings of the left. The political subtext of *Rage and Time* is an attempt at coming to terms with and eventually proposing possible ways of overcoming the exhaustion of the left. It sees political theory as a critical tool to take part in political reality rather than simply reflecting about it. The political theory centered on the concept of *thymos* interprets recent political history from the perspective of violated honor and recognition claims to then address the translation of these violations into rage dynamics. Rather than simply presenting a realist interpretation of recent historical events, *thymotics* engages in a normative theory in the more specific sense of using the insight into *thymotic* dynamics to promote a political economy of what Sloterdijk calls “balancing acts.” Contrary to the current manifestations of the rage of losers, the goal is a rage free of resentment, a rage that successfully balances *eros* and *thymos*. The parallels to Nietzsche, which I will not address in this paper, cannot be overlooked.

I will argue that the account presented by Sloterdijk is successful with regard to the first two dimensions, i.e. the dismissal of idealizing normative theories and the interpretation of recent historical events. However, as I will point out in the final section, at least in its current form, it fails to present a convincing alternative to the partially self-incurred insignificance of the left due to its lack of channeling *thymotic* energies to make convincing threat aimed at the systematic causes for pathologies and conditions of injustice. As it stands, the politics of rage lack a convincing vision of a world in which there would be fewer motivations for rage.

Sloterdijk rereads Plato and Hegel through the lens of neoconservative thinkers Leo Strauss and Francis Fukuyama. Plato had argued in the fourth book of the *Republic* that the human soul consists of three parts: reason (*nous*), appetite (*epithymia*), and what he refers to as “*thymos*.” *Thymos*, which is usually translated as “spiritedness,” is that part of the soul which houses pride, a need for recognition, and courage. When claims to pride and recognition are not satisfied, the *thymotic* part of the soul reacts with spirited emotions ranging from shame to rage. Hurt *thymos* triggers struggles for recognition.⁷ Although this part of the soul is different from reason, it is not reducible to the corruptive appetite of physical desire. “In the soul,” Plato writes in the fourth book of the *Republic*, “the spirited is a third part, by nature the helper of reason, if it has not been corrupted by bad upbringing.”⁸ The *thymotic* part of our soul responds to suffering from injustice, be it our own or that

of others. However, it is not itself part of reason, because one can be angry without being guided by reason in acting on that anger. The German term “*Jähzorn*” (fury, irascibility), a particular kind of “*Zorn*” (rage), captures this difference. *Zorn* might be supported by reason. *Jähzorn*, on the other hand, is an instinctive and immediately released form of fury that leads to reckless action. In some situations, though, *thymos* is neither a potential auxiliary of reason nor a form of recklessness, but it settles conflicts between reason and desire. *Thymos* is a second-order desire that potentially helps reason to suppress foolish desires when reason by itself fails.

It was thus recognized by the ancients that *thymos* is normatively ambivalent, which is the major reason why it has in turn been treated like a stepchild by mainstream normative theory with its emphasis on “positive” or “ideal” norms and erotic emotions. In the *thymotic* urge, selfishness and selflessness are intertwined. When a person does not feel taken seriously, when she feels his or her honor to have been violated, that person responds ferociously. She does not simply call attention to the equality of human beings and the need to respect every citizen of the kingdom of ends. Rather she feels misrecognized in her *particular* claims. When people are being offended and made feel like they are worth less than they think they are worth, they become angry.

Yet, this becoming angry is not rooted in particular claims aiming at the satisfaction of egoistic desires. As an innate, affective sense of justice, *thymos* allows its bearer to lift himself up beyond his petty concerns for life and pleasure. It does so in a way which often leads to violence and tragic downfall. For this reason, Plato ultimately eradicated the normative ambivalence of *thymos*. He argued that, only if reason, appetite, and thymotic spiritedness would form a harmony in which *thymos* and animal appetite were *under the control of* reason, would it be possible to live a life characterized by justice, temperance, and happiness.⁹ This inclusion of our desire and spiritedness under reason only worked as long as hierarchies could still be seen as harmonic. Of course it is not possible to literally translate Plato’s psychology to our day. The tripartite division of the soul in which reason is presented as the highest faculty is modeled on the problematic assumption of an organically structured but ultimately static city in which reason corresponds to the philosopher king, appetite to the workers, and spiritedness to the class of warriors. Furthermore, modern pedagogy no longer assumes that “when a man gives music an opportunity to charm his soul with the flute, and to pour through his ears as through a funnel those sweet, soft and plaintive tunes we have mentioned, when he spends his whole life humming them and delighting in them, then, at first, if he has any spirit, it is softened as iron is tempered and, from being hard and useless, is made useful.”¹⁰ However, in spite of the obvious distance to Plato’s socio-political ideals and pedagogical convictions, a reconsideration of the function and the dynamics of the spirited part of our soul suggests itself, if we want to make sense of the global dynamics unraveling in recent history.

In drawing on the ancient Platonic theory of a thymotic force influencing our action, a force that is neither reducible to reason nor to desire, Sloterdijk emphasizes the complexity that constitutes our ethical, economic, and political life. In particular, there is the intertwined nature of claims for honor and recognition, on the one hand, and acts of rage and revenge following the violation of these claims, on the other hand. This complexity accounts for an ethical as well as historical dynamic that cannot be analyzed appropriately without taking seriously the normative complexity of *thymos*. Currently we lack the conceptual resources to rightly address this complexity.

Some examples can help to illustrate that liberal institutions and modes of thinking are insufficient when trying to come to terms with the eruption of *thymotic* energies. Let us look at two prominent cases: that of honor killings and that of international terrorism. An honor or customary killing is the killing of a family or clan member by another family member, where the killing is committed because it is believed that the victim has brought dishonor upon the family—usually by adopting liberal sexual practices or ways of dressing. The number of honor killings has rapidly increased during recent years, especially in Western societies with a significant immigration from the Islamic world. Ordinary citizens do not quite know how to react to these events. They sense that honor killings are not ordinary crimes, because the motif is not based on merely egoistic inclinations. However, there is also a consensus that these killings *are* crimes after all, even if it is possible to understand that the motif for them is something one can still understand as adhering to a cross-cultural value such as family piety. Honor killings pose

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serious challenges not only to the moral sensibilities of enlightened liberal adults, but also to the legal systems of liberal democracies. We are not dealing with conventional murders in which emotions blind the sane mind and lead to actions which could be regretted later. In most cases there is a rather deliberate decision of the perpetrator to kill the victim, which would suggest that we are dealing with a case of murder. Frequently the perpetrators of these killings do not only acknowledge that they might end up in prison: the act of punishment is seen as part of the process of “reestablishing honor.” Vendettas require sustained commitment and are often accompanied by high degrees of reflexivity during the process of planning and carrying them out. They can thus not be reduced to spring from mere impulsive (re)actions. In various cases, judges have opted to accept a cultural defense (for example by drawing on the *Sharia*, the Islamic law) and imposed only reduced sentences to the perpetrators. In the absence of a more refined moral and legal categorization, these killings have then been interpreted as instances of manslaughter instead of premeditated murder although it was apparent that the killing was not impulsive and followed an internally coherent process of rationalization. The justifications often draw on cultural values that can claim some level of universality. The reestablishing of family honor, the usual motive, is a value that is accepted across cultures, even if the interpretation of what it requires and how it relates to individual rights is different.

The normative disorientation that the liberal psyche experiences in light of the explosion of *thymotic* energies becomes even more obvious when we consider the rise of and responses to international terrorism. The rage of those whose honor and recognition claims remain unanswered is a key motive in the acts that have led the West into its “war on terror.” The terrorists are successful in constantly recruiting mostly young male second, third, and fourth sons without future prospects for suicide missions. The success is due not only because the leaders of terror cells are masters of propaganda and understand how to channel the *thymotic* energies of those who feel humiliated or left out by the erotic promises of speculative capitalism. Terrorist movements are as successful as they are because they provide exhilarating utopian visions not free of eroticism: on the individual level in the form of the promise of joining the company of 72 virgins after the suicide mission; on a social level many terrorists hope to gain recognition within and outside of their family for fighting the “infidels”; and on a socio-historical level they hope to contribute to the reconstitution of the global emirate and bring about a new Islamic millennium.

Seen from an erotic as well as *thymotic* perspective, the war on terror is more problematic on the side of the so called “free world”. This is because it cannot be won while it is instrumentalized to erode the achievements of liberal democracies, most importantly the welfare state and the rule of law (by reducing social infrastructures and restricting civil liberties to the point of legalizing torture for political purposes). Although radical Islamic fanaticism is more successful than the “free world” in the management of the affective impulses of the losers of globalization, it also represents an anti-modern movement that seems highly anachronistic. While borrowing innovative Western technologies, Islamic fundamentalists romanticize living in cages and try to install an anti-egalitarian social order. These neolithic ideologies then make use of the technical achievements of the 21st century. Since terrorist leaders have not been able to formulate innovative visions for the world of tomorrow, the movement gets stuck in a form of blind rage that is guided by resentment and nostalgic images. As much as angry losers can be devastating and spread fear, they cannot be victorious. As dialectical opposites terror and the fight against it converge in their conflation of productive rage with retribution and resentment. This leads us to the question: if the rage that explodes in terrorism is anachronistic and resentful, what features would progressive rage reveal?

One way to answer this question is to contrast the current economy of moral affects to that of the ancients. The contemporary political homelessness of rage energies can be juxtaposed to the world of the ancients as it is presented in the foundational document of Western culture, the *Iliad*, a poem which starts with the words “Sing, Goddess, sing of the rage of Achilles, son of Peleus.”¹¹ The world of the Homeric epic seems very distant to us. The moral valorization of war and heroic struggle as exemplifying the meaning of life only survives in the illusion-creating entertainment industry. That true satisfaction could only be reached on the battlefield of higher causes is a concept that is incommensurable with the moral cosmos of enlightened adults who have

learned the lesson that rage should not explode directly.

Following Aristotle, St. Augustine had defined rage as inherently aiming at revenge (*ira appetit vindictam*). According to Christian dogmatism, rage or wrath was thus included as a prominent member in the list of the seven deadly sins (next to lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, envy, and pride).¹² Rather than following the call of immediate pay-back for suffered injury in uniting the role of judge and executor, post-heroic citizens place trust in the ultimate authority of the rule of law, the courts, the police, and the penitentiary system. The achievements of relegating the authority of violent payback to the state has allowed to create a pacified civil society in which thymotic impulses are tolerated only in the form of peaceful competition within a highly eroticized market that is to a large extent dependent on the continuity of illusions. The excess of rage is supposed to be sublimated by cultural means, as Freud suggested in *Civilization and its Discontents*. Instead of waging war, modern enlightened *connoisseurs* are trained to peacefully compensate our *thymotic* urge through the consumption of the arts as well as sports. Dancing to a concert or watching the soccer championships, going to the museum or playing video games such as *Counter-Strike* are thus nothing but a symbolic enactment of a culturally prohibited act of taming one's *thymos*.

The ancients, in contrast, were capable to ascribe to the spirited state of mind a significance that is higher than human. By participating in the affect of rage, they thought, human beings get as close as it gets to the world of the gods. According to the moral cosmos of the ancients, moral elevation consists in an act of fully identifying and following the flow of extreme affects. The emotional metaphysics of the ancients allows for a participation in a reality in which the self is transformed by partaking in higher values than those available in everyday life. True sacrifice thus consists in making oneself into an instrument or medium of the divine command that articulates itself in extreme emotions. Before the modern subject sat itself up as the master of its emotions, "it is not the human beings who have their passions, but rather it is the passions that have their human beings."¹³

What is it that led to the modern distrust in *thymotic* actions? Appealing to the denigration of emotions in general under conditions of increased normative abstraction and institutionalization of legal systems can at best be part of an explanation. Emotions do not just celebrate a revival in contemporary debates in moral philosophy, in a way they have never been absent. Whether Confucius, Aristotle, Epicurus, Schiller, Schopenhauer, or contemporary care ethicists—they all emphasize that emotions, although not reasons for action, are central building blocks of any convincing normative theory. Without the right emotion, they argue against formalist and overly intellectualized accounts of morality, there is no action at all.

If not a neglect of emotions in general, what is it then that led to the suspicion of *thymotic* affects in particular? A primary reason is that many normative accounts tend to exclusively focus on what are perceived to be good, pacific, and healthy emotions such as compassion, empathy, or love. They either ignore other emotions or treat them as being either derivative of or privations of the allegedly good emotions. *Thymotic* impulses have been ethically vanquished and stigmatized as belonging to a precultivated, archaic state of—predominantly male—development into which we can always sink back if we are not careful.¹⁴

The valorization of erotic emotions and virtues over *thymotic* ones is as old as philosophy itself. Aristotle already insists that the virtuous person cultivates mildness of temper "the even tempered person confesses to be calm and not carried away by his feelings, but to be cross only in the way, at the things, and for the length of time that reason dictates."¹⁵ Compassion is introduced as an antidote to revenge. The virtuous character does not lose the control that is necessary to provide for a self-sufficient emotional economy, which is the precondition for achieving a life that is marked by wisdom, even-temperedness, and justice. Seneca's influential work on rage, *De ira*, which was immensely influential for Christian and humanist ethics, calls for a Stoic control of the dangerous affect. The general suspicion against the destructive consequences of this aggressive emotion is not limited to the European tradition. Confucius already warns his students "to let a sudden fit of anger make you forget the safety of your own person or even that of your parents, is that not misguided judgment?"¹⁶ Daoism and Zen-Buddhism promote meditative practices and compassion to overcome our fixation on the need of being angry

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with ourselves and the world surrounding us. More recently, Martha Nussbaum argued that we should aim to understand “how to channel emotional development in the direction of a more mature and inclusive and less ambivalent type of love.”¹⁷ According to Nussbaum, anger should at best operate as a tool of compassion. Acts of punishment are then seen as merciful rather than vindictive because they aim at the good of the victim.

These representative examples illustrate that the eroticization of the psyche replaced what is regarded as archaic forms of militancy that, it is contended, mistakenly suggest that honor, pride and craving for recognition (and the rage that results from the violation of these) has been considered to be more important than a concern for justice, equality and compassion.

We might think that the dislike of negative emotions in general and potentially aggressive ones in particular results from an insight into the misfortunes these emotions bring about. Revenge, then, is undesirable because it tends to be too costly in producing long term damages. Hegel, for example, reminds us in the *Philosophy of Right* of the infinite chain of violence, the economy of pay-back that results from blind vengeance and self-administered acts of justice.¹⁸ The excesses of rage can easily lead to tragic repetitions of an original act of violence that might be impossible to get out of. Honor killings often lead to new honor killings rather than the reestablishment of justice and the fight against terror breed more terrorists.

However, despite the danger of vengeful affects to lead to unwanted chain reactions, we should be careful to follow the prevailing tendency of privileging erotic over *thymotic* affects. Often rage is an *appropriate* response to injustice and serious wrongdoing. It can be a force not just of cathartic purification from holding a grudge and reestablish sovereignty, but also a major tool for creating justice and gaining power of the oppressed. Neither the French Revolution nor more recent emancipatory movements such as feminism or environmentalism would have been possible without their distinct forms of rage. When supported through justified indignation, rage can be an emancipatory force that does not simply expose violations but at the same time brings about an engagement to correct them. It is productive whenever it is not simply a reactive response sparked by envy or resentment. Ideally, it appears as great courage, which is why “*thymos*” has sometimes also been translated as “stout-heartedness.” In extreme cases this courage commits its bearer to risk his or her life for causes “higher” than his own affairs and interests. Even among the negative emotions, rage enjoys a privileged moral standing. In contrast to hatred, for example, rage can be balanced and does not simply aim at destruction for its own sake. Whereas hatred does not stop after a certain sanction was imposed, rage can recede after justice has received its dues. In contrast to the negative emotions of greed or envy, rage does not rest in the unfulfilled desire to maximize one’s benefits over those of others, but expresses a sense of universal justice.¹⁹ The logic of rage rests on implicit egalitarian assumptions. When we become angry at someone, we see that someone as an equal who has violated a morally sanctioned law and thus turned into an antagonist. With inferiors, in contrast, one is disdainful, annoyed, or irritated, but not angry, while one is afraid of superiors until one becomes angry at them and confronts them.

In drawing on the heroic song of the *Iliad*, Sloterdijk reminds us that in antiquity—or at least in a certain tradition of antiquity expressed in the great epic works and tragedies—rage belonged to a heroic character. It was not simply deducible from external provocations: “Achilles is wrathful just as the North Pole is icy, the Olympus is surrounded by clouds, and Mont Ventoux is surrounded by roaring winds.”²⁰ To be a hero simply means to listen to and act on the voice of one’s *thymos*. It is not the careful and considered practice of retribution and certainly not the giving and taking of reasons in an ideal uncoerced discourse.

In our post-heroic universe, the virtues of hesitation and rational deliberation have replaced virtues of forceful action. However, if the world (and human culture) is a memory house in which the medium human being accumulates traumatic memories of suffering from moral injuries, insults, and humiliations, the question arises how to deal with this stored memory. There are at least two historically prominent strategies of dealing with stored rage that come to mind. There is the Christian strategy of “forgiving, but not forgetting.” The good loving God of the *New Testament* replaced the God of wrath of the *Old Testament*. Settling scores is not up to us,

but, if at all necessary, it will be God's business when the Day of Judgment comes. The Christian command to turn the other cheek implies a prohibition of revenge and commits us to an apocalyptic vision of history in which justice remains to come and, with it, rage is transferred to the last moment of time.

Or, alternatively, there is the strategy of taking over God's position and instill humanity as the judge—be it as party, dictator, or movement. The pure form of Christian political theology is replaced by a theological politics when radical political movements on the left or on the right proclaim a monopoly on managing rage and practicing revenge.²¹

Thymotics is the technology of channeling stored *thymos* for political purposes. History is the history of the administration of these mnemonic resources. Social institutions as well as the self-therapeutic ideas of Buddhism, Stoicism, and Christianity had the role of cultivating and redirecting stored energies through meditation, retreat, and forgiveness so that they would not break out violently. Since the forces of secularization weakened the great world religions, and socialism has vanished as an existing political alternative, we are left in a situation where *thymotic* energies are up for grabs. If they are not to be instrumentalized within the war on terror or swallowed up by the erotic lures of consumerism and the recent "return of religions," it is necessary to channel them in more meaningful political ways.

In order to begin thinking about such a progressive politics of rage, we need to reconsider the guiding assumption of liberalism that individuals are the primary political agents and bearers of rights. Sloterdijk's reinterpretation of the history of civilization from the perspective of rage breaks with the grounding assumption of liberal political theories in that his model of rage politics does not start from the perspective of individuals, but from that of groups. Plato and Marx after him already pointed out that people do not just want their own honor and dignity recognized, but also desire the recognition of their various group affiliations. If a group is feeling that its worth is recognized less than what it thinks it deserves, it will find ways and means to make itself heard. Sloterdijk refuses to address groups as if they would be individuals with certain desires, wishes, and programs of action. Rather groups and their organization within parties function like financial institutions in which emotions are being acquired, stored, traded, and, from time to time, released.²² Sloterdijk uses the allegories of the "world bank of rage," "*thymos* monopolies," and "*thymotic* dividends" to characterize the accumulation and dispersal of rage quanta. Under conditions of capitalism, greed-dynamic transactions characterize the erotically loaded forms of life in which overcompensation for everyone is promised without being realizable. The promise of overcompensation replaces the traditional promise of being adequately rewarded for one's efforts. Those excluded from the benefits of the overcompensation promise and those without luck in the permanent lottery of speculative capitalism form an increasingly dangerous army of the angry and frustrated.

In a countries like Japan, a country in which workers used to enjoy a tacit right to have life-long employment in the same company, is it not unlikely that rage-movements will form if companies like Sony, Toyota or Honda will continue laying off workers and the historical victory of the democratic party does not bring about the desired *thymotic* abreaction and the promised erotic fulfillment. Workers do not simply lose jobs. In a world guided by the ideal of the *homo oeconomicus*, if you get fired you first lose your recognition as worker; if you lose your recognition as a worker, you lose your dignity; and if you lose your dignity, you lose your sense self. Under conditions of capitalism economic failure *is* moral failure.

Honor and dignity violations constitute a politically explosive arsenal. However, this arsenal could also be a progressive means of transformation. At present progressive parties are not presenting themselves as agencies that responsibly invest rage to harvest emancipatory returns. Mainstream parties only administer hopelessly dept-ridden budgets and threaten the citizens with the specter of being outsourced due to competition in a globalized market in which labor power and capital is freely traded. As it stands, parties on neither side of the political spectrum are capable to transform the stored up *thymotic* energies into the courage to become politically active. When moments of violent eruptions do occur, there is no political mechanism, there are no rage agencies to channel them in lucrative political projects.

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This current inability to steer rage-movements productively became particularly apparent in the late October of 2005 when a group of mostly male adolescents from immigrant families engaged in riots in the Paris *banlieus*. A few people quickly turned into a rage mop. Sparked by allegations of a chase by a couple of police men and resulting death of two teenagers with an Arab background—an allegation that turned out to be false—the riots which lasted for weeks expressed a deeper anger about racism and poverty in a country that prides itself for its welfare state and faith in equal human rights and opportunities. An estimated 10,000 vehicles were burned, 5,000 people were arrested, and 170 million Euros worth of damage was created in the respective suburbs. No party attempted to transform these “untidy” energies into a meaningful political protest movement that would have been capable to make convincing threats. The only consequences were republican calls to wider access to education following the remark of Sarkozy, at the time minister of the interior, that the “rabble” (*racaille*) should be taken off the streets and that everyone who would be unhappy in France—in particular people with a foreign background—had the right to leave the country if they didn’t want to be there.²³ This example illustrates that currently there is a lack of political organizations that would have the power or even the intention to make productive use of rage. The existing agencies propagate a politics of fear rather than one of courage.

Finally, it is necessary to end by pointing to a blind spot in the project of a political theory of rage that has been discussed. The actualization of *thymos* reveals it as a dynamic factor in history. It has been shown that *thymos* is an expression of a moral craving for recognition as well as the struggle against injustices. Sloterdijk’s expressed aim is to argue for a balancing act of *eros* and *thymos*, the passive, inward-directed and the active outward-directed desires of our soul. So far the main achievement of reconsidering *thymos* is to have pointed to its normative ambivalence and the dangers of unproductive *thymotic* explosions springing from resentment. However, it is not in Sloterdijk’s (or anyone else’s) interest to stage himself as the Cassandra who warns us of a future of *thymotic* catastrophes. Rather, the task for New Leftist movements is to open up ways of engaging in politically promising rage agendas, and harnessing them to desirable ends.

How is it possible to make productive use of rage? How can one distinguish between bad and good *thymos*? With Robert Musil, Sloterdijk regards the becoming one with the pure driving force of *thymos* as the “utopia of a life based on motivation,” a life that would be at once *thymotic*, erotic, and rational. Far from romanticizing violence or blind acts of self-administered justice, it would be necessary to create a global culture in which pride *for the right causes* would have importance again, a culture in which the violation of justified pride claims would lead to the productive use of *thymotic* energies. It is essential that rage projects are in fact aiming at the fate of the worst-off and do make use of morally permissible means, avoiding violence wherever possible and engaging in risks whenever necessary.

Sloterdijk, as far as I can see, does not provide us with such a thymotic project. The vision Sloterdijk presents is at least as old as John Locke: the basic rights to life, freedom, and property. The liberalism that the theory promised to overcome is thus smuggled in through the backdoor. This becomes particularly apparent in Sloterdijk’s recent critique of the current model of a welfare state, which finances its services by way of a progressive tax system, and thus turns into a “state cleptocracy.”²⁴ There Sloterdijk presents the vision of a revolution that would replace the current accumulating and redistributing hand of the government, which is said to be financed by overtaxing the efforts of the top performers (*Leistungsträger*), through a government that would rely on the good will and donations of a country’s elites. Apart from its implausibility and unsubstantiated claims concerning tax revenues, this vision is regressive and solidifies neoliberal tendencies while crippling social progress.

The liberal defense of an open culture of ambition and pride with sporadic acts of critical abreaction is akin to the competitive framework of speculative capitalism. Rather than calling for a new progressive movement with threatening power, Sloterdijk suggests localized practices and a trust in long-term civilizational learning processes that cannot be achieved through short-term activism. Where these processes could come from and how their *thymotic* and erotic appeal is to be balanced remains open. The, to my mind unfortunate, call for patience implicitly reiterates Seneca’s dictum that “the greatest remedy against anger is postponement.”²⁵ This reformist stance might suffocate productive rage rather than organize it for the right causes. It rests on a form

of historical optimism that is difficult to reconcile with political reality. In the face of blatant injustice there is a need to offer a different vision to that of an unconditional trust in civilizational learning processes.

Rage is not a historical subject that operates independently of its bearers and their needs and motivations. Usually rage is *someone's* rage that is directed at *someone else* for specific reasons. The “someone else” might be an individual or a group. Rage can be directed at another person, a group of people, or even at a situation that is experienced as the cause of injury. Reasons for rage are numerous. They include an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor, new forms of social exclusion and subordination, widespread feelings of social and political impotence, as well as the irreparable damage that has already been done to the global ecosystem. Nonetheless, on a political level it has become increasingly difficult to subscribe to, or even imagine, large-scale rage projects after the vanishing of grand narratives including their grand scapegoats, be they capitalists, communists, Jews, or Muslims. The failures of speculative capitalism do not seem to be *someone's* failures. In the middle of a global financial crisis it might not be possible to pinpoint the exact causes and attribute responsibility to specific actors—even though some investment bankers and managers have been sentenced. Yet, many feel rightly dissatisfied with the attempt to simply manage a massive crisis they did not bring about and see it as a catalyst for new alternative forms of politics. The decisive question of the future thus seems to me to be whether it will be possible to invent forms of productive rage that can do without a traditional addressee.

The deep tension between the erotic promise of overcompensation (unconditional rights to privileges and prosperity) and the *thymotic* indignation resulting from an increasing failure to realize this promise for the majority of the population is calling for new rage agencies. It is likely that these will not be traditional parties but international grassroots movements with a shared sense of indignation and a shared vision. *Attac*, to name just one of the movements resisting neoliberal globalization, already has 90,000 members and is active in more than fifty countries.²⁶

Last but not least, in order for rage to be free of resentment, such movements would need to be coupled with a utopian vision, a vision of a world in which there would be less systematic causes for suffering from injustice. I have argued that a political theory of rage is a promising alternative to current idealized models in that it focuses on the source motivating emancipatory action. The positive flipside of the indignation that provides for political agency has always been the hope that a better world is indeed possible. It is the message of hope in a better world that allows addressing and improving conditions that keep inhibiting such a world. There is a need for philosophers and other politicians to not shy away from the courageous *polemos* of rethinking utopia.²⁷ Janus-faced, the *thymotic* process must look backward and forward. Emancipatory prophets would have to draw on indignation as well as hope. Such prophets provide a link between an unjust and a world that, while not free of injustice, would be more just. Rage free of resentment does not strive for eternal punishment but for the establishment of new forms of social and political life. It provides glimpses of conditions in which fewer systematic violations would lead to fewer reasons for rage. Adorno, an author whose raging critique was as relentless as his utopia of a better world, puts it as follows: “consciousness could not even despair over the grey did it not harbor the notion of a different color whose traces are not absent in the negative whole”²⁸ ■

THE RETURN OF RAGE

NOTES

1. Cf. Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion, and Will*. New York: Humanities Press, 1963; Robert Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1976; Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, ed., *Explaining Emotions*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980; Christoph Demmerling and Hilge Landweer, eds, *Philosophie der Gefuehle*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2007.
2. For the purpose of this paper I do not clearly distinguish the emotions of anger, rage, and wrath. These terms share a family resemblance in being expressions of *thymos* and are not sufficiently distinguished in common language.
3. Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987.
4. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Trans. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1987.
5. The translation is forthcoming with Columbia University Press in April 2010. All references are to Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006.
6. For a systematic attempt to break with ideal theory and a political philosophy that emphasizes deliberation over power and universal rights over particular interests cf. Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.
7. Francis Fukuyama writes “Plato’s thymos is therefore nothing other than the psychological seat of Hegel’s desire for recognition,” *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Avon Books, 1992, 165.
8. Plato, *The Republic*. Trans. G.M.A. Grube. London: Hackett, 1974, 441a.
9. For a detailed reconstruction of the role of *thymos* in Plato’s corpus see Angela Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero: Courage, Manliness, and the Impersonal Good*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
10. Plato, *The Republic*, 411 a-b.
11. Homer, *The Iliad*. Trans. Ian Johnston. Arlington: Richer Resources Publications, 2007, I, 1.
Cf. H. Huehn’s entry on “Zorn” *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 12. Basel: Schwabe, 2004, 1382-1390.
12. Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit*, 12.
13. A rare exception to the predominant trend is Robert C. Solomon who describes anger as “neither a ‘good’ nor a ‘bad’ emotion” and as “an ideal test case for any emotional theory.” *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*, 227.
14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. Roger Crisp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, IV 5, 1126a.
15. Confucius, *The Analects*. Trans. Dim Cheuk Lau. London: Penguin, 1979, XII: 21.
16. Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, 395.
17. G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Ed. Allen W. Wood. Trans. H. B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, §101.
18. Demmerling and Landweer, *Philosophie der Gefuehle*, 287-310.
19. Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit*, 10.
20. Cf. Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation of Sloterdijk in the context of Walter Benjamin’s conception of “divine violence,” *Violence*. London: Profile, 2008, 157-161.
21. See especially p. 221-248 and 302-314 in Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit*.

22. Cf. “Nicolas Sarkozy continue de vilipender ‘racailles et voyous’,” in *Le Monde*, November 11th, 2005.
23. Peter Sloterdijk, “Die Revolution der gebenden Hand,” in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 10th, 2009. The article was harshly criticized by Axel Honneth and sparked a debate.
24. Seneca, *Moral and Political Essays*. Ed. J. F. Procope. Trans. John M. Cooper. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 88.
25. Cf. the networks website at <http://www.attac.org>.
26. Critical theory has had a complicated relationship to utopia and prophesy. On the one hand utopian projections are necessary to provide for normative orientation. On the other hand, they could lead to political escapism in idealizing possibility over an engagement with actuality. Maeve Cooke convincingly argues for a form of critical theory that is both immanent in focusing on historical injustice and transcendent in providing utopian visions of a good society: *Re-presenting the Good Society*. Cambridge, MIT Press, 2006.
27. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2008, 370.