

Useful Anger

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I argue that expressions of anger are usually the most and sometimes the only fitting way to deal with systematic recognition-based injustices. I will argue this point principally by appealing to examples taken from First Nations' movements in Canada. First, I will deal with what an effective response to recognition-based injustices would require. I will identify three requirements: that it handle the functional inability of our institutions to grant more freedom to the marginalized social group, that it handle how the general public's perception is governed by misrepresented categories of identification of the social group, and that it address the inherently urgent nature of the issue of redressing injustices. Second, I will show that these requirements are best met by expressions of anger. Such expressions will be analyzed fundamentally as expressions of urgency and of the presence of epistemic barriers on the side of the listener that prevent the listener from making sense of what the speaker is trying to communicate.

To demonstrate what effective responses to recognition-based systemic injustices would require I will first explain the features of this sort of injustice. I will outline its structure by appeal to the status of First Nations' as recognized by the Canadian government. The main features of these systemic injustices—

which will serve to guide my exploration of the First Nations' situation in Canada—are the following: interactions between two parties as governed by a misrecognition of one party by the other which results in oppressive consequences for the misrecognized party; the status of the misrecognized party as subject to the authority of the other party (which makes objection by the oppressed party to the misrecognition affecting them illegitimate); and the oppressor's perceived non-epistemic lack as to the recognition of the oppressed party (sustained, for example, by a myth of prior proper deliberations between the parties about their statuses or via the assumption that one party can simply read off the inherent worth of the actions of the other). The example of official First Nations' status from the standpoint of the Canadian state will highlight how government discourse (in the wide sense including action) produces barriers in conversation pertaining to First Nations related policy, produces standards of action for First Nations people, and provides ready explanations for the failures of First Nations to conform to supposed proper conduct.

The state of injustice that First Nations in Canada are subject to I call neocolonial. As Coulthard explains (Coulthard 117), this state is the result of state misrecognition of First Nations which permits application of a transitional political model—meant as framework for managing situations after or during transitions from an unjust system towards a just system—in dealing with the

situation of persistent injustices to which they are subject. The way First Nations are recognized under the transitional politics model prevents them from bringing to the fore their actual concerns. Not only does the imposition of this model to this context fail to address systemic injustices (e.g. continued occupation of unceded territory), but it reframes the situation as of a finished, unjust event in the past, which then frames the responsibility of the state as satisfied by reparations for that event alone. Action in this framework positions First Nations as members of a social group that was victimized by historical events (e.g. residential schools), whose harm persists into the present day only via such vehicles such as intergenerational trauma. The use of the transitional model implies about First Nations in Canada that their suffering is not caused by ongoing systemic injustices based on misrecognition of who they are.

The resultant status of First Nations contrived via this political framework is that they are a Canadian social group with, like any other cultural group, a particular history and shared values and experiences, and that has suffered a form of institutional abuse which has now been recognized by the state and duly addressed. As a result of the affirmation of this social group in actions governed by a model of transitional politics, it appears to be out of question that there is systematic injustice against this group, for it is presupposed—and thus implied—by the political agenda

regarding First Nations that fair recognition of First Nations by the state has long been accomplished. The persistence of this political approach (along with the discourse that accompanies it) only strengthens the illusion of righteousness of this form of recognition. The terrain of legitimate political concerns that First Nations can have is therefore explicitly delineated and to go beyond—such as in rebellious or persistent actions for the purpose of changing how the state recognizes them—is easily considered irrational, especially since the explanation of trauma is ready to hand. The persistence in deemed irrational actions is also suggestive of a form of cultural failure to deal with the situation of trauma and allowance for such dishonesty as thinking that more is due to them than what has been obtained. One might expect, for example, that the community would care enough about the people making the mistaken claims to try and dissuade them or explain to them how the injustice has actually been redressed now. Another facet of the cultural group category of First Nations is that from this position they are subservient to the state and have to tolerate its decisions, since the state has the supposed function of impartially making decisions on the basis of the competing interests voiced by the different parties. This structure positions First Nations' claims as at least more prone to being erroneous than the state's because of the necessary presence of the factor of self-interest in them—which is supposedly absent from the state's operations, since as arbitrator it is supposed not to have a personal

stake in the issues. Thus, all claims by such a group will be heard as coming from this biased, partial position, with important consequences for the nature of the claims it can make.

With this in mind I will now express the main difficulties with which an appropriate response to the injustices outlined above has to deal. First, the status of being First Nations imposes institutional constraints on the agency that a subject having that status can have. For example, a First Nations' claim to something will not have precedence over another group's interest by virtue of it coming from the distinctive nature of First Nations' identity, because the recognized status of First Nations is not such that it would take precedence. If a claim made to official state institutions doesn't stay within the bounds of what is deemed an acceptable claim to be made in the name of that social group, then it would either have to be reinterpreted in a way which aligns with the rights the social group is recognized as having, or be abandoned. A further difficulty with appeal to state institutions is that the process of casting a judgment over the legitimacy or illegitimacy of a claim may isolate the one casting final judgement from a context permitting more of a back and forth, permitting clarification, identification of misunderstandings, and also making it perhaps more difficult to disregard the legitimacy of a claim of the grounds that the person making it is psychologically perturbed.

Another important factor is the gradual absorption of the state-fabricated notion of First Nation status by the general public. This phenomenon makes it especially difficult to come to view First Nations as having other political standings towards the state (for example, equal ones), because the issue is with a social category of identification. To recognize someone as First Nations becomes to recognize them as a historically marginalized minority (instead of as pertaining to both historically and currently oppressed social groups). In turn, identifying First Nations as historically marginalized minorities legitimizes certain explanations for their behaviour and delegitimizes others. In many cases—like most day to day interactions—one does not perceive oneself as having the time and leisure to stop and actually talk with a First Nations person about whether an act of theirs is legitimate for them to make and to hear their side--especially since one's conception of who First Nations are necessarily informs whether a particular action (such as bringing up a certain conversational topic) concerning First Nations makes sense or not, or makes more sense (and is thus more urgent) than another. Since, in this case, the content of this social category brings with it certain expected psychological conditions, there is a ready-to-hand explanation for any observed conduct that doesn't fall within the conduct which is considered legitimate for members of that category. Rather than seeing actions that don't fall into one's category of legitimate First Nations actions as a form of self-conscious departure from that

sphere of being, and symptomatic of perhaps too narrow a concept of First Nations in one's mind, one's category of 'First Nations' instead leads to the explanation of such acts as irrational. Thus, in any case, when dealing with First Nations persons, nothing new, intriguing, important is present in uncustomary behaviour because there is no behaviour that can be uncustomary. Also, since this behaviour is considered irrational, there is no use in trying to engage with First Nations people through any rational methods, like undertaking a serious conversation about politics with the hope of enlightening them. Thus, as Mills suggests, such identity concepts are hard to identify because we "see through them" and thus do not notice them (Mills 24)—thus, nothing significant can ever come from an everyday encounter with a First Nations person. Furthermore, not only does this problem affect people in the government who work in positions that deal with complaints from First Nations—thus rendering policy decisions based on these same categories of identification less recognizable as suspect—but it also affects the media—since it must cater to the public taste, and would be pressured not to present material suggestive of another status for First Nations because of the risk of it being widely perceived as obviously wrong, and thus banal and lacking interest (whereas, for example, novel development by the state in approaches to deal with First Nations trauma--since addressing the perceived significant societal problem of their irrational actions and possible claims--could be considered interesting). Social

media, by conforming to these social expectations, also reinforces social conceptions underlying these expectations as normal, since other views on the subject matter wouldn't receive coverage; coverage by social media (due to what is regarded as its political function) is commonly perceived as representing the different standpoints that one can take on an issue, thus retracting other views as regards to what First Nations can legitimately be perceived as doing as being legitimate.

The third and last aspect of the problem that I have identified as important to account for in articulating a meaningful response to the unjust situation of First Nations is the issue of urgency in redress of the situation. The present neocolonial recognition of First Nations encourages racism towards them. If the social group with which you identify is perceived as backwards, ineffective, and riddled with tendencies towards false consciousness, there is a greater likelihood that you will become unsure of yourself and your cultural endeavours, because such claims presuppose an epistemological advantage over First Nations about the worth of their ways of being. The systemic problems which affect them and those they love and care about directly and which they experience so clearly as injustices, will continue to proceed on their devastating course until they are corrected, making it an issue of great urgency to correct. Thus, the solution to such systemic, recognition-based injustices must take into account

the political instantiation of the misrecognized category of First Nations; the injustice of being reduced to a practically unassailable social category, and last the urgency of correcting the injustice.

In the following analysis, anger will be revealed to be paradigmatically the right response to systemic injustices. First I will analyze the significance of the form of anger, then the significance of form in anger, then what would be a legitimate content for this form, and finally I will analyze the legitimacy of deploying anger. Throughout, I will show how an angry response is the right response to a situation of systemic injustice, especially taking into account the three difficulties outlined above that such a situation presents. The following analysis treats anger insofar as it could be used as an effective means of expression; cases of unreasonable anger will be left to the side.

The form of anger primarily expresses a sense of urgency to its recipient. This urgency implies not only the objective importance of an issue, but also the importance of it being made known to the recipient. It implies that a manifestation of urgency is necessary for the communication of the information to be successful. Thus the expression of urgency—let's take an increase of voice volume as an example—frames the person at whom the anger is directed as not only lacking information, but also lacking the capacity (in their normal way of receiving and processing

information) to properly deal with certain aspects of the straightforward communication of the information. This could be because of prejudices concerning the importance of what that type of person has to say, or about the topic of the communication (the righteousness of the First Nations' cause in Canada for instance). In the second case it is noteworthy, however, that the prejudice infects the speaker, since for the speaker to take as reasonable a position deemed unreasonable is for them to be unreasonable. In any case, it is the assumptions that the person has made that render the normal communication ineffective.

An expression of anger that frames one as bearing a piece of information that is important to communicate to the recipient highlights the speaker's perception of prejudices in the recipient that undermine the possibility of successful communication on the issue from actually occurring. An expression of anger demands that one recognize that one's assumptions about the whole event of the communication could be wrong or, in any case, have to be set aside for the communication to effectively be delivered; the angry communication promises that, under these conditions, what the recipient of the communication will get is a worthy justification for putting these prejudices aside and entertaining the possibility of listening to the interlocutor as a rational being capable of insight into the subject matter, who should only be condemned as irrational when given the most explicit evidence. The angry person

thus assumes knowledge of the listener's assumptions about things that would affect the listener's capacity to take the care in listening that is required by the significance of the topic to both the interlocutor and the speaker. By bringing the status of these assumptions as issues for the communication (which is contingent on their at least temporary repudiation) these assumptions have to be consciously identified. This, however, is something that occurs rarely with them since, as we have seen, prejudices condition what shape the judgments, perceptions, and acts that we do form and undertake can take, and are not themselves among the objects that appear to be meaningful to think about. Rae Langton further highlights how often what is salient in belief formation concerns less the likelihood of the truth and more the societal pressure to conform to social norms (85, Langton). Thus one can find oneself with one's perspective heavily informed by very implausible convictions. When presented with anger, then, many of one's prejudices could reveal themselves to be problematic and it would be a shame if a person was so confident in themselves and in love with their beliefs that they could not even consider the possibility of them holding false beliefs or misplaced values in exchange for the possibility in (likely) just at most usually a few minutes of their time to have revealed to themselves problems that they would take to be important and thus lead to a more wholesome orientation in their lives.

I will now turn to the question of how angry communication manifests urgency. As has been discussed, it only makes sense for the listener to stop to listen--and suspend some of their prejudices--if it is understood by the listener that to do so would be in their best interest given the situation (something which anger is useful in communicating). In other words, only if the matter is portrayed as urgent for the listener and thus as needing to take precedence over their other interests. In the case that the anger is not an effort to communicate anything but is only symptomatic of a passion to destroy or hurt something, no matter if the act be right or not, it is clearly a bad thing. The question thus arises of how the expression of anger can be recognized as legitimate.

To legitimate itself, the angry expression tempts the recipient to see the expression as irrational and thus brings the significance of the judgement of irrationality, with all its presuppositions, to the surface of the communication. The solution to the problem of recognition-based injustice is to break through the surface of all the behaviours which are usually associated with some sort of irrationality which, to use our example, First Nations are commonly subject to. The wager is that the recipient of the communication will become attentive to the significance of their own looking for an explanation that avoids the usual assumption of entirely rational communication. An implication is that expressions of anger can be very diverse and means also that each one is individually significant because each unsuccessful attempt,

where anger fails to break through the barrier of prejudice, becomes another, new instance of the usual refrain that potential listeners have become accustomed to, thus reinforcing the association between anger and the explanation of irrationality as well as expanding the range of phenomena that the explanation covers (which also implies that the situation is more dire than expected to the listener). This means that subsequent attempts to communicate the same content will be increasingly pressured to employ new forms of anger. In reality, such expressions can take the form of a wholesale uprising of numerous bands who block public transit and access to land that they deem important—such as during the Mohawk Standoff (Coulthard 121)—or as a settler becoming a close friend of a First Nation and then at a certain point having a discussion along the lines (if need be) of the pattern of anger (although it could be infinitely gentle). Although it is often thought that anger involves screaming, yelling, violence, etc., if we recollect even for a few seconds we can all think of very “unangry” manifestations of anger that are yet very much angry.

Now I will turn to the issue of what kind of pressure the form of anger exerts on the contents of legitimate angry statements and show that it is perfectly suited to expression of recognition-based injustices. The most important feature of angry communication that I identified is that it permits one to expose perceptual limitations that would otherwise not permit a recipient

to see what the communicator is trying to expose. Anger is necessary in order to make the topic of communication visible as the communicator sees it, and only then is one able to judge its worth and henceforth reevaluate the truthfulness of one's original perceptual values. This is only necessary if there is a perceptual prejudice that lies in the way of way of what is intended to be delivered and if there is an injustice in considering the communication as somehow unable to provide what it is intended to provide.

Lastly, the question arises of how one could legitimately be so certain as to use anger—as laid out above—to express something. As we have already seen, anger relies on a claimed position of epistemological authority. The question is: can a situation occur in which someone—without recourse to anger—would be in the position to communicate something to another person who, were it not communicated, would end up losing out on some good or continuing to contribute to injustice despite being in a position to significantly reduce it? This assumes that the speaker, knowing well the culture that the recipient inhabits, knows they would be insulated from gaining this knowledge and also that such insulation would be somehow harmful. This must involve some good reasons for thinking that the recipient is lacking in significant knowledge. The legitimacy of the angry expression also requires from the recipient a conceptual closedness of their horizon

of possibilities which excludes the speaker from having anything to say that the other party doesn't already know or should value. I think this is exactly the case for groups that are marginalized because of conceptions of gender and/or race. I will again draw on my example of First Nations in Canada to frame the issue. Their position involves a misrecognition justified in terms of a past fiction of proper mutual recognition of them or by, as Coulthard points out (Coulthard 101), ethnocentric judgment systems, which conclude that there was no nation to be found, merely since they aren't able to identify anything resembling the forms of nationhood that they were familiar with. In this last case, the situation of First Nations in Canada requires an attempt by settlers to reaffirm the existence of different forms of social organization that are compatible in aim and value with forms of colonial social structure. This recognition, though, first requires understanding how First Nations see the world. On the flip side, the marginalized group can see flaws in recognition because colonial recognition of them informs policy choice, the consequences of which they experience. They know—in any case more than the colonizers who never got to see them for what they were—what the status and value of their society was, and thus to what extent colonialism and neocolonialism has done ill to them by misrepresenting it. Thus, expression of anger that I have analyzed as expression of urgency accounts for the urgency criterion (for obvious reasons, but also because anger lets one see who can be an ally and who will never

be, and does not let one be governed by misplaced hopes about time that others might give to address one's plight, as anger is a demand that they create time for the issue); it takes care of the perceptual disinterestedness with common-day plights and acts of First Nations by enabling new forms of activity to disrupt expectations and bring harmful prejudices to the surface of critical consciousness; and it enables one to counter the problem of institutional limitation of what is recognized as legitimate action by demanding that employees listen without peering through the lens of institutional recognition. The problem of institutional limitations is also countered by potentially bypassing some of the bureaucratic processes and skipping to, for example, meetings with people that otherwise they wouldn't have been able to speak to and on different grounds than they would have been able to without anger. Finally, anger can function effectively through an appeal to the judgments of individual people through a bottom up political movement, especially through the force of media coverage, social media, person-to-person interaction, etc.

In conclusion, cases of recognition-based systemic injustice—such as the case of First Nations in Canada—demand a response that counters the effects of institutional misrecognition, such as the limiting of one's capacity to change one's status, and having one's public actions misrecognized as irrational, and the persistence of appeal to institutional change within the transitional

model by the general public because of their internalized and incorrect notions of First Nation status. Most importantly, such a response must also deal with the urgency of change required by a situation of ongoing injustice. Anger in communication, according to my analysis, is an appropriate reaction to exactly this kind of problem due to its ability to bypass the problems just noted. The implication of this is that anger should be looked at with greater sympathy, especially in cases in which it might seem irrational and is in fact considered so by almost everyone. It is a call to be more conscious of and open to pursuing and accepting critique, even and especially when it at first seems violent or irrational.

Works Cited

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