

All the Rage

The politics of anger, Left and Right ... but mostly Left

By Peter Wood

THE ANGRY LEFT doesn't like the Stupid Right. The Stupid Right doesn't much care for the Angry Left. I never thought the marriage would work out.

To some observers, the political anger of the Left and Right are emotionally similar. After all, both have had some intemperate episodes in recent years. Clinton-hating, with its gleeful descents into theories about Vince Foster, Ron Brown, and the Mena Airport does resemble Bush-hating, with its merry speculations about Afghan oil pipelines and pre-9/11 tip-offs.

The theory that the Left and Right are angry in the same way, though not about the same issues, has been most vigorously developed by Boston College sociologist Alan Wolfe. His view is that political elites on both sides benefit from creating an atmosphere of polarization, and the press amplifies their angry noises. Despite these nonstop efforts to incite anger, the American people have reached rough consensus on most supposedly contentious issues.

Wolfe's view of political anger as the histrionics of an elite denies that there is any meaningful difference between the tantrums of the Left and the connipations of the Right. The no-polarization thesis and its no-difference-between-Left-and-Right-anger corollary have attracted support from scholars and media attention.

In June, in the *New York Times*, John Tierney extolled a book by Stanford University's Morris P. Fiorina, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, which dwells on the majorities of Americans

who support stricter gun control, the death penalty, and legal abortion and oppose racial preferences in hiring. In August, Joe Klein headed for the dead middle in *Time* magazine in an article headlined, "The People Aren't Split: Beyond Michael Moore vs. Rush Limbaugh." Klein likewise cited Fiorina's study as evidence that most of us are staying out of the crossfire. Klein said he hates "the Anger-Industrial Complex."

I've spent much of the last year immersed in that complex, as I was writing a book entitled *A Bee in the Mouth* on contemporary American anger—or New Anger, as I call it. And I think Wolfe, Fiorina, Tierney, Klein, and others who minimize the degree of polarization mistake what is actually happening.

The cultural disagreements that the political elites give voice to are vividly present in the lives of ordinary Americans. But it is a kind of polarization that isn't easily registered. Even the now famous exit-poll question that showed that 22 percent of voters in the presidential race believed that "moral values" were the most important issue only caught a fleeting glimpse of this reality.

The angri-culture conducts its battles in popular music (hip hop at one extreme, country at the other), television (Comedy Central vs. Fox News), sports (Title IX vs. stock-car racing), and even in clothing styles, tattoos, and cosmetics. Differences that might at first glance look like mere matters of taste reveal underlying assumptions about self-control, personal responsibility, and anger. When is it appropriate to get

angry? And how should that anger be expressed? On the Left side of the cultural divide, anger is a sort of god. To get angry is to be self-empowered and achieve authenticity. Anger of this sort is essentially repudiation, and it takes aim at "authority" that it attacks as unjust, illegitimate, and oppressive. Before the election, the political Left had tapped into these feelings and directed them at Bush, but the feelings were already there among millions who daily mistake a surly attitude as a step toward personal freedom.

On the Right side of the cultural divide, anger is regarded as a dangerously delicious poison. To get angry is to feel momentarily powerful but often at the expense of good judgment. The anger of cultural conservatives is a combination of indignation over violations of traditional moral standards and resentment at the condescension of the cultural elite towards traditionalists of any sort. The political Right can tap into pent-up anger by touching either of these themes or both at once, as when it invokes Bill and Hillary Clinton.

The anger on the Left and the anger on the Right are equally real, but they are not the same thing, either in emotional color or in their intensity. After the election, the Left's anger turned sullen as it switched from vilifying Bush to castigating those who voted for him. When the illusion of self-empowerment promised by New Anger fails to deliver real power, where do the sullen turn for solace? The angry Left has four options:

- Take refuge in a feeling of intellectual and moral superiority
- Blame the lackluster candidate; the principle was right
- Blame the sneaky Republicans; the principle was right
- Realize that anger is not really empowering after all

In the weeks following the election, the first choice was the Left's most audible answer: by sneering at red-state voters, leftist pundits could sustain an afterglow of rage. *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich, who before the election shimmered in his eagerness to vilify Bush, followed the election with a column scrubbed of anger and dressed instead in a peculiar satisfaction. Though Bush won, both parties will henceforth have to "cater to [the] overwhelming majority's blue tastes" for "salacious entertainment." Rich, for example, imagines that admirers of Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" are also buying Jenna Jameson's *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star*. Leering about how denizens of conservative states hypocritically wallow in "excess and vulgarity" might seem an odd way to recover from a political disappointment. But it does justify the expense of anger in others' shame.

The second and third options are straightforward ways to keep anger on boil. The Howard Dean constituency believes the angry message was right; it was just entrusted to a diffident, overly nuanced messenger in John Kerry. Internet conspiracy theorists who think that Diebold engineered Bush's victory by rigging voting machines provide another way to stoke the old resentments.

But what about the last option? Doubts among Democrats about anger as a political strategy are perhaps most audible in conversations about the need to reach out to "moral values" voters. This sort of rhetoric doesn't directly

repudiate anger, but it does seem to redirect attention to less belligerent concerns.

Taken together, neither the Democratic Party nor its leftward flank seem on the road to repudiating the politics of anger. That's because, even if anger doesn't win elections, it has become a part of the personal identities of many erstwhile liberals and antinomian leftists.

This emotional stance was in play long before the '04 presidential race and will remain a factor for years to come. It will endure because it is rooted in motivation and character rather than the excitements of a political season. To understand the anger on the leftward side of the cultural divide, one has to go back over the course of two generations.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Americans discovered the enchantment of angrily repudiating traditional norms of emotional self-restraint. This wasn't the result of a single cultural impulse but came about as the mingled force of several movements. After World War II, for example, Freudian psychology enjoyed its Golden Age, which spread the conceit that repressing anger is more dangerous than venting it.

At the same time, postwar intellectuals domesticated continental existentialism, which extolled as the highest value acting on one's authentic self against the compromises and hypocrisies of "mere" convention. Holden Caulfield, the prep-school hero of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, spent his fury against the "phonies" he encountered. At least he didn't follow Albert Camus's hero in *The Stranger*, who achieves his existential authenticity by shooting one of those meaningless other people.

The American *avant-garde*, in the form of Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation, were meanwhile pioneering an emotional stance that combined anger at bourgeois American life with a taste for histrionics and spectacle. The opening line of Ginsberg's *Howl* captures

self-pity and showmanship along with anger in a tone that is virtually identical to today's leftist op-ed columns: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked."

As if Freudianism, existentialism, and a howling *avant-garde* were not enough, the decade brought the beginning of a feminist movement enamored with the idea that only by getting really angry with her oppressors can a woman liberate herself.

After 1960, the tributaries to this attack on emotional self-restraint proliferate, but one stands out: the dramatic shift from the civil-rights movement to the Black Power movement. The civil-rights movement presented grievance in the old-fashioned form of holding anger in check. The Black Power movement extolled emotional release.

The generation that launched these movements grew up in families where the older ethic of emotional self-control still prevailed—or at least lingered. But when the participants in these movements had children of their own, they brought their new emotional orientation to the task. In the 1970s and 1980s, a substantial number of children grew up in families (or were raised by single parents) that favored an emotionally open and expressive style and regarded emotional self-restraint with suspicion.

When Americans think about their history, they tend to think of events—wars, disasters, and national achievements—rather than shifts in the way people experience emotions. Emotions seem so—subjective? Personal? Hard to pin down? They are all those things, but they are also shaped by popular ideals and influenced by the prevailing temper of the times. And they are especially under the sway of cultural edicts. If people believe that it is wrong to give vent to anger or shameful to show fear, they will go to considerable effort to calm the one and

stifle the other. Broadly speaking, in the last half century, a large number of Americans have abandoned those ethics in favor of an emotional style that puts a premium on immediacy and authenticity.

Since New Anger has its roots in the anti-traditionalist movements of the 1950s and the counterculture of the 1960s, it is no surprise that the Newly Angry are most numerous on the Left. But the maelstrom of cultural changes never stays within the neat bounds of ideology. Human nature being what it is, traditionalists often get yanked into the vortex along with the original advocates. A popular culture that reinforces the virtue of emotional expressivity is hard to counter with an appeal to self-constraint, quiet respect, and dignity. Thus the Right is also heir to this legacy of "I'm angry therefore I'm real," but unlike the Left, it resists.

The cultural division in America goes far beyond the political elites of Left and Right and their media surrogates hurling lightning bolts at each other. Rather, that division is embodied in the emotional realities of American life, where most people find themselves ranged either on the side that anger is empowering or on the side that anger is tempting but fraught with danger. The former is simpler to state and perhaps easier to sell, since it really invites us to swim along with an already powerful instinct. But the traditionalist response, which summons the older ideal of self-control, is deeply appealing because it offers a life more worth living.

The Angry Left has become increasingly sensitive to the accusation that it is overly angry, and has responded in several ways. One is to declare that wrath against President Bush knows no legitimate limit. From Jonathan Chait's declaration in the *New Republic* that "I hate President George W. Bush" to the recent publication of Nicholson Baker's novel *Checkpoint*, which revels in assassina-

tion fantasies, exponents of the Left's unbridled wrath have been dominant.

The Democratic National Convention, on the other hand, presented the Angry Left's botoxed smile. That approach—pretending the anger didn't really exist—dovetailed nicely with Wolfe's thesis that political polarization is just a game played by the cultural elite. Lewis Lapham in the September issue of *Harper's* offered a revisionist history of the rise of conservatism in America, under the title "Tentacles of Rage." In Lapham's view, the "rage" that deserves analysis is not the Left's fury against Bush. (That, he implies, is good common sense.) Rather it is the Right's overwrought attack on liberalism that, in the course of several decades, has reduced befuddled Americans to patsies for greedy corporations and the rich.

The Lapham essay reminded me of something I'd read in my wanderings in the lava fields of anger. In 1999, Bonnie Berry, who styles herself a "critical criminologist" and is director of the "Social Problems Research Group" in Gig Harbor, Washington, published a book titled *Social Rage: Emotion and Cultural Conflict*. Berry allows that "both left and right movements can be considered rageful," but she has next to nothing to say about leftist rage. Her book examines skinheads, militias, survivalists, groups comprised of victims of crime, purveyors of anti-homosexual prejudice—and Republicans. Among the more mordantly amusing sections is "Rage, The Conservative Right, and Nazism." This is not to imply that Berry is an insensitive person. She delicately notes, for example, "As we know, many people (in particular, many white people), believe that O.J. Simpson killed Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman." And her book has a little note at the beginning eschewing "America" as a synonym for the United States. So, yes, it is possible to conjure a worldview in

which all the rage in America bubbles up from the Right. Berry explains, "The demise of the American dream has angered the privileged who used to be even more privileged," and "These disenfranchised people usually place [the blame] inaccurately, not on the ultrapowerful ... but on historical scapegoats."

Whether we follow those who blame conservative intellectuals for inventing the Culture War or those like Berry who "Blame angry white men for scapegoating minorities," these analyses seem strangely remote from the actual lives of most Americans. Anger is now, as it has always been, a familiar force, felt by everyone in some form. What is different now is that, on one side of the cultural divide, people are giving themselves much greater license to express anger. Indeed some are triumphantly angry and are on a kind of angry debauch. This doesn't promise anything good.

One morning in November, the Angry Left rolled over in bed and realized it was still married to the Stupid Right. What now?

Being an anthropologist, I look for the ways in which dramatic developments in one domain of culture play out in other domains. The presidential election was just one episode in a much broader struggle over the character of American life. Thus out-of-control fans mixing it up with thuggish players at an NBA game seems as much a barometer of our national temper as a Paul Krugman column.

If in fact we are in a period of conservative political ascendancy, we would do well to put restoration of traditional ideals of emotional self-control on the agenda. Teaching Americans how to govern their anger may well make the Angry Left even angrier—and all the easier to defeat. ■

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Trading Security Away

Offshoring puts our information sector at risk, though the greater danger may come from lost expertise rather than a cyber-attack.

By W. James Antle III

THE USUAL homeland-security nightmare scenarios focus on hijacked airliners or suitcase nukes being shuttled into the country by terrorists. But in today's information-based economy, should we be just as concerned about the cubicles where our software code is written? As dependent on intricate computing and telecommunications systems as the United States has become over the last decade, the security of our information technology (IT) capabilities is impossible to ignore.

Ask people about the relationship between technology and national security, and the question immediately conjures Hollywood-style images of al-Qaeda cell members huddled in Internet cafes unleashing electronic Armageddon on major American cities. In an era of terrorism and rising anti-American sentiment throughout the world, such doomsday scenes cannot be dismissed entirely. But perhaps they overshadow the likelier threat to our safety from rising dependence on others for our country's technology needs.

The issue has gained new salience as companies increasingly move key IT functions and infrastructure to foreign countries, where they can operate at a lower cost than in the domestic market. Offshoring is usually discussed in the context of dollars and cents: the money companies save on the bottom line by farming out such tasks as software development to low-cost labor markets or the impact on the jobs and wages of American technical professionals. But

some now question whether the practice exposes software source codes and IT infrastructure to heightened risk.

Concerns about computers being used as weapons are not new. In February 1998, as the U.S. was preparing for possible military operations in Iraq, the Solar Sunrise attacks were carried out against Defense Department computers worldwide. Hundreds of network passwords were obtained, and many key systems on unclassified networks were affected, although nothing mission-critical was compromised.

The attackers did not turn out to be terrorists or Iraqi saboteurs. Instead, they were two teenagers from California and one from Israel. Instead of being reassured, government officials wondered what more sophisticated attackers could have done. The incident helped the term "cyberterrorism" gain currency, with experts warning about the possibility of hackers logging on

Businesses and government responded with heightened IT scrutiny. According to the Gartner Group, by 2001 companies were spending at least \$3.6 billion annually on security software alone. But many industry insiders argued that major cyberattacks on the level often referred to as "Electronic Pearl Harbor" were unlikely because of the amount of time and resources they would entail. A 2002 study by the U.S. Naval War College concluded that an attack of that magnitude would require five years of planning and \$200 million in funding. Viruses, often written by people no more technically advanced than the Solar Sunrise attackers, have become a frequent and costly nuisance but hardly anything likely to bring the economy to its knees.

Much of the preparation for Y2K—when businesses feared that their systems would confuse 2000 for 1900 and checked software line by line in an

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and shutting down power grids, opening city water valves, or disabling telephone networks, which became the subjects of articles, academic papers, and hearings. Congressman Lamar Smith (R-Texas) famously proclaimed, "A mouse can be just as dangerous as a bullet or bomb."

effort to avert service interruptions—was done by foreign programmers. When incidents of resultant sabotage and theft proved to be as rare as major Y2K-related outages, many companies came to the conclusion that apprehension about moving programming work offshore was unwarranted.