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The Real Roots of American Rage

The untold story of how anger became the dominant emotion in our politics and personal lives—and what we can do about it.



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I. An Angry Little Town

SOON AFTER THE SNOWS of 1977 began to thaw, the residents of Greenfield, Massachusetts, received a strange questionnaire in the mail. “Try to recall the number of times you became annoyed and/or angry during the past week,” the survey instructed. “Describe the most angry of these experiences.” One woman knew her answer: Recently, her husband had bought a new car. Then he had driven it to his mistress’s house so she could admire the purchase. When the wife found out, she was livid. Furious. Her rage felt like an eruption she couldn’t control.



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The survey was interested in the particulars of respondents' anger. In its 14 pages, it sought an almost voyeuristic level of detail. It asked the woman to describe the stages of her fury, which words she had shouted, whether punches had been thrown. "In becoming angry, did you wish to get back at, or gain revenge?" the survey inquired. Afterward, did you feel "triumphant, confident and dominant" or "ashamed, embarrassed and guilty"? There were also questions for people like her husband, who had been on the receiving end: "Did the other person's anger come as a surprise to you, or did you expect that it would occur?"

Greenfield, population 18,000, was an unusual place to plumb these depths. It was a middle-class town with a prosperous tool-and-die factory, where churches outnumbered bars two to one. Citizens were private and humble, and—except for a few recent letters to the editor lamenting that the high-school hockey team had been robbed in the playoffs—the town showed little evidence of widespread resentment. In fact, this very placidity was why Greenfield had been chosen for the study.

The author of the questionnaire was James Averill, a psychology professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Averill was a gentle soul, the kind of man who had once returned to a grocery store to apologize to a cashier after becoming annoyed over miscounted change. But he was convinced that his academic colleagues misunderstood anger. He had attended many conferences where researchers had described it as a base instinct, a vestige from our savage past that served no useful purpose in contemporary life. "Everyone basically thought anger was something that mature people and societies ought to suppress," Averill told me. "There was this attitude that if you were an angry person, you ought to be a bit embarrassed." In journal articles and at symposia, academics described anger as a problem to be solved, an instinct with little social benefit. "But that didn't really make any sense to me," he said.

Despite his genial disposition, Averill had been known to mutter angrily when a driver cut him off. He felt bursts of indignation on a regular basis, as did everyone else he knew. And though he rarely acted on these impulses, he suspected that anger wouldn't be lurking in his psyche unless it served some important purpose. "When something's bad for us, we usually get rid of it through evolution or social codes. But anger has been a part of humanity for as long as we've been alive," he said. "It's in the Bible and novels and plays. It's one of the most common emotions people say they feel."

Averill decided that the best way to understand anger was to survey ordinary people—people who get upset at their co-workers, who yell during rush hour—about their experiences. He went looking for an average town and found Greenfield. He figured if he could show that its citizens, despite their contentedness, still experienced occasional bouts of fury, it would be a wake-up call to other researchers that more scrutiny of anger was due.

Averill's expectations were modest. He assumed that most Greenfield residents would say they only infrequently lost their temper. He expected respondents to confess that they were embarrassed afterward, and that, in retrospect, their paroxysms had only made things worse. In fact, he figured most people would toss the questionnaire in the trash.

Then the survey from the aggrieved wife arrived. Other replies soon began flooding his mailbox, so many that Averill had trouble reading them all. "It was the best-performing survey I've ever conducted," he told me. "Some people even attached thank-you notes. They were so pleased to talk about being angry." The replies contained unanticipated responses: The betrayed wife, it turned out, wasn't all that upset about the mistress—she had harbored suspicions for years, and to be frank, if another woman was willing to put up with her husband, more power (and sympathy) to her. But how dare he show *her* the new car first?

Other respondents described more mundane arguments, over who ought to take out the trash, or curfews for teenagers, or snappish tones at the dinner table. People were eager to talk about their daily indignations, in part because they felt angry so

frequently. “Most people report becoming mildly to moderately angry anywhere from several times a day to several times a week,” Averill later wrote, summing up his research in *American Psychologist*.

Anger is one of the densest forms of communication. It conveys more information, more quickly, than almost any other type of emotion.

Most surprising of all, these angry episodes typically took the form of short and restrained conversations. They rarely became blowout fights. And contrary to Averill’s hypothesis, they didn’t make bad situations worse. Instead, they tended to make bad situations much, much better. They resolved, rather than exacerbated, tensions. When an angry teenager shouted about his curfew, his parents agreed to modifications—as long as the teen promised to improve his grades. Even the enraged wife’s confrontation with her unfaithful husband led to a productive conversation: He could keep the mistress, as long as she was out of sight and as long as the wife always took priority.

In the vast majority of cases, expressing anger resulted in all parties becoming more willing to listen, more inclined to speak honestly, more accommodating of each other’s complaints. People reported that they tended to be much happier after yelling at an offending party. They felt relieved, more optimistic about the future, more energized. “The ratio of beneficial to harmful consequences was about 3 to 1 for angry persons,” Averill wrote. Even the targets of those outbursts agreed that the shouting and recriminations had helped. They served as signals for the wrongdoers to listen more carefully and change their ways. More than two-thirds of the recipients of anger “said they came to realize their own faults,” Averill wrote. Their “relationship with the angry person was reportedly strengthened more often than it was weakened, and the targets more often gained rather than lost respect for the angry person.”

Anger, Averill concluded, is one of the densest forms of communication. It conveys more information, more quickly, than almost any other type of emotion. And it does an excellent job of forcing us to listen to and confront problems we might otherwise avoid.

Subsequent studies have found other benefits as well. We're more likely to perceive people who express anger as competent, powerful, and the kinds of leaders who will overcome challenges. Anger motivates us to undertake difficult tasks. We're often more creative when we're angry, because our outrage helps us see solutions we've overlooked. "When we look at the brains of people who are expressing anger, they look very similar to people who are experiencing happiness," says Dacher Keltner, the director of the Berkeley Social Interaction Lab. "When we become angry, we feel like we're taking control, like we're getting power over something." Watching angry people—as viewers of reality television know—is highly entertaining, so expressing anger is a surefire method for capturing the attention of an otherwise indifferent crowd.

In the years after his survey, Averill watched as anger studies became the focus of academic specialties and prestigious journals. In 1992 alone, social scientists published almost 25,000 studies of anger.

Then, in early 2016, Averill was watching newscasts about the presidential primaries. The election season had barely started, and the Republican field was still crowded. Governor Nikki Haley of South Carolina, giving the Republican rebuttal to President Barack Obama's final State of the Union address, took a subtle jab at one of her party's candidates—a clownish figure the establishment hoped to marginalize.

"During anxious times, it can be tempting to follow the siren call of the angriest voices. We must resist that temptation," Haley told voters. "Some people think that you have to be the loudest voice in the room to make a difference. That's just not true."

Soon afterward, reporters swarmed Donald Trump to ask how he felt about such a public renunciation. “Well, I think she’s right, I am angry,” Trump told CNN. “I’m angry, and a lot of other people are angry, too, at how incompetently our country is being run.” Trump continued: “As far as I am concerned, anger is okay. Anger and energy is what this country needs.”

As Averill watched, he felt a shock of recognition. Everyone believed Trump would be out of the race soon. But Averill wasn’t so sure. “He understands anger,” he thought to himself, “and it’s going to make voters feel *wonderful*.”

AMERICA HAS ALWAYS BEEN an angry nation. We are a country born of revolution. Combat—on battlefields, in newspapers, at the ballot box—has been with us from the start. American history is punctuated by episodes in which aggrieved parties have settled their differences not through conversation, but with guns. And yet our political system was cleverly designed to maximize the beneficial effects of anger. The Bill of Rights guarantees that we can argue with one another in the public square, through a free press, and in open court. The separation of powers forces our representatives in government to arrive at policy through disagreement, negotiation, and accommodation. Even the country’s mythology is rooted in anger: The American dream is, in a sense, an optimistic reframing of the discontent felt by people unwilling to accept the circumstances life has handed them.

Recently, however, the tenor of our anger has shifted. It has become less episodic and more persistent, a constant drumbeat in our lives. It is directed less often at people we know and more often at distant groups that are easy to demonize. These far-off targets may or may not have earned our ire; either way, they’re apt to be less invested in resolving our differences. The tight feedback loop that James Averill observed in Greenfield has been broken. Without the release of catharsis, our anger has built within us, exerting an unwanted pressure that can have a dark consequence: the desire not merely to be heard, but to hurt those we believe have wronged us.

We have learned a great deal about anger since Averill began studying it, and for all its capacity to improve our lives, it can also do great harm. The scholarship of Averill and his successors shows how ordinary anger can be sharpened, manipulated, and misdirected—and how difficult it is for us to resist this process. Under certain conditions, the emotion can transform from a force that helps keep society knitted together into something that tears it apart.

Lately, evidence of anger's destructive power is everywhere. Witness the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, in which the nominee and his Republican backers in the Senate denounced the proceedings in red-faced diatribes. "This is the most unethical sham since I've been in politics," Republican Senator Lindsey Graham shouted at his Democratic colleagues. "Boy, y'all want power. God, I hope you never get it." On the midterm campaign trail, former Attorney General Eric Holder offered a revision of Michelle Obama's high-minded credo from just two years earlier. "When they go low, we kick 'em," he said. "That's what this new Democratic Party is about."



Lately, anger seems to have consumed American politics. At the confirmation hearings of Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, the nominee and his Republican backers in the Senate denounced the proceedings in red-faced diatribes. (Michael Reynolds / Reuters)

It's tempting to lay the blame for this devolution at the feet of the current president. Trump has vilified Democrats, immigrants, the media, the left-leaning philanthropist George Soros. This fall, we witnessed the real-world effects of such bellicose rhetoric: Pipe bombs were mailed to Soros and several other prominent Democrats, and a shooting in Pittsburgh left 11 people at the Tree of Life synagogue dead. Both accused assailants engaged in hateful online speech before undertaking their horrific acts.

Those attacks were perpetrated by violent extremists. But on both the left and the right, a visceral disdain for one's political opponents has become common, as have feelings of *schadenfreude* when the other side suffers a setback. In 2012, political scientists at Emory University found that fewer than half of voters said they were deeply angry at the other party's presidential nominee. In 2016, almost 70 percent of Americans were. What's worse, this partisan nastiness was also directed at fellow citizens who held opposing views. In 2016, nearly half of Republicans believed that

Democrats were lazy, dishonest, and immoral, according to the Pew Research Center. Democrats returned the favor: More than 70 percent said that “Republicans are more closed-minded than other Americans,” and a third said that they were unethical and unintelligent.

We may be further down a path toward widespread violence than we realize.

Trump made the most of this animosity during his campaign, as Averill predicted he would; he has mastered the levers of emotional manipulation better than any of his political opponents. But our predicament predates the current president. In 2001, just 8 percent of Americans told Pew they were angry at the federal government; by 2013, that number had more than tripled. If we diagnose our anger problem as merely a Trump problem, we’ll be sorely disappointed when he eventually departs public life and we remain enraged.

To avoid that fate, we have to appreciate how anger works. Ordinary anger can deepen, under the right circumstances, into moral indignation—a more combustible form of the emotion, though one that can still be a powerful force for good. If moral indignation persists, however—and if the indignant lose faith that their anger is being heard—it can produce a third type of anger: a desire for revenge against our enemies that privileges inflicting punishment over reaching accord.

We are further down this path as a nation than you may realize, but it’s not too late for us to reverse course. If we can understand anger’s mechanisms, we might find a way to turn our indignation back into a strength.

II. Righteous Rage

IN THE MID-1960S, California residents, if they happened to look at the back pages of their local newspapers, were likely to see a smattering of articles about a small group of angry grape pickers. At the time, much of the nation’s focus was on the civil-rights movement in the South, where Martin Luther King Jr. and others were

making difficult but steady progress toward ending Jim Crow. In the agricultural fields of Central California, however, where much of the nation's fruit and vegetables were harvested, there was little cause for hope.

For more than half a century, various labor associations had struggled to organize the men, women, and children who toiled in California's sunbaked fields. About 250,000 workers—many of them migrants from Mexico and the Philippines, some in the country illegally and unable to speak English—plucked grapes and picked asparagus stalks in punishing heat. Foremen had standing instructions to fire the slowest workers at the end of each day, so pickers raced through fields and, lacking toilets, relieved themselves in the dust.

When unions did manage to organize the itinerant laborers, they had limited success at the negotiating table: Workers sometimes undermined their own demands by returning to the fields as soon as bosses made minor concessions. Many of the laborers were too poor and too hungry to mount the types of sustained demonstrations that were remaking the South. Even labor organizers themselves settled for incremental change. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee—an offshoot of the nation's largest federation of unions, the AFL-CIO—had no patience for soaring oratory and spiritual fellowship. “This is a trade-union dispute,” the director, Al Green, told his followers. “Not a civil-rights movement or a religious crusade.” In 1965, Green's group had signed up 4,500 laborers.

Among some workers, however, there was chatter about a new leader. Cesar Chavez was a migrant himself; he had traveled as a child to California from Arizona after his family lost their home. He began working in the fields after finishing the eighth grade, picking peas in winter, cherries in spring, and cotton come fall. Chavez had been drawn into organizing by a series of injustices; in one, police in Salinas Valley had arrested a Mexican teenager, questioned the boy for more than 20 hours, and then charged him, with little evidence, for the murder of a white high-school football player. Chavez spent his days stacking lumber, and nights and weekends registering voters. Eventually he created his own organization, the National Farm Workers Association. The group published a newspaper named *El*

Malcriado, which roughly translates to “The Problem Child.” Meetings, one participant later recalled, “were like revivals,” with impassioned speeches, songs, and prayers. At one, workers promised, with a hand on a cross, to never break a strike.

Chavez had a basic theory about organizing: The key to solidarity, he believed, was appealing to workers’ emotions—particularly their sense of moral outrage. Urging people to fight for their own self-interest could achieve only so much. If you focused solely on higher wages or better working conditions, you were setting goals that lacked the emotional resonance people needed to commit to a cause.

But if you could transform a labor dispute into an angry, righteous movement, then people’s sense of the possible would change. “My motivation comes from my personal life,” Chavez explained. “It grew from anger and rage ... when people of my color were denied the right to see a movie or eat at a restaurant.” Chavez believed that people needed to look beyond their day-to-day complaints. The kind of anger he drew upon did not offer the immediate catharsis that Averill would one day describe. Rather, it provided something else: the opportunity to right an injustice, to feel like part of a meaningful fight. “We are ready to give up everything, even our lives, in our fight,” his group often said. “We are suffering. We have suffered, and we are not afraid to suffer in order to win our cause.”

In September 1965, the Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee authorized a strike against California’s grape growers, one of the region’s largest and most powerful industries. Chavez’s group was unprepared for such a drastic action. It didn’t have the funds to feed striking families or the infrastructure to support a widespread protest. But Chavez argued that the organization had no choice: If it didn’t participate, the effort would wither and die.

The group’s leaders gathered to think and pray. One proposed flying to New York and holding a vigil at the headquarters of one of the most influential growers. Another argued for making the trip by bus, to draw attention to their plight. Those were good ideas, Chavez said—but he proposed a plan that would require even

greater sacrifice. What if the group marched from the dusty grape fields all the way to the state capitol in Sacramento, 300 miles away?

It was an audacious suggestion. Such a march would take almost a month. But if it was timed correctly, Chavez said, the protesters could arrive on Easter Sunday. The Agricultural Workers Organizing Committee scoffed at the idea. The more traditional labor group couldn't see the benefit of a march. Other organizers had spent decades trying to get workers to walk off the fields for just one day at a time, with little success. But Chavez's group, angry and motivated, voted to go forward.

On March 17, 1966, about 50 people gathered near Garces Highway with sleeping bags over their shoulders and clothes in paper bags. The youngest marcher was 17; the oldest was 63. Carrying signs, banners, and flags, they began their long walk. They covered 15 miles on the first day. That night, they slept in a makeshift camp. The next morning, they set out again: 285 miles to go.

A GREAT DEAL OF RESEARCH has explored Chavez's thesis that moral outrage can achieve widespread change. Scholars, in examining successful protest movements, have sought to explain how anger goes from the fleeting feeling that Averill studied to a pervasive, more powerful moral force.

One clue to understanding how this shift occurs emerged about a decade ago, when historians began reexamining past rebellions, such as the mutiny against the East India Company in the mid-1800s. For decades, the company had ruled the Indian subcontinent by building armies of indigenous soldiers overseen by British officers. Indian troops were treated poorly, paid very little, and forced to move far from their families and serve for long enlistments. These should have been conditions ripe for insurrection. But there were few uprisings.

Then, in 1857, nearly two-thirds of the East India Company's regiments broke out in a spontaneous, violent rebellion. When a Stanford researcher named Hayagreeva Rao began examining historical records, he found something noteworthy: Right before those regiments rebelled, a rumor had spread that soldiers' new rifle cartridges, which they would tear open with their teeth before

pouring the gunpowder into their weapons, had been greased with beef tallow and pig fat. Most of the troops were Hindu or Muslim and thus forbidden from consuming beef or pork, respectively. As Rao looked deeper, he found something else: Many soldiers who rebelled had attended religious festivals immediately prior to mutinying, and had listened to religious leaders preaching about the historical oppression of Muslim holy men and Hindu prophets. The rebelling regiments had thus seen their everyday frustrations remade as something more profound. “When the regiments had an opportunity to reframe their complaints as moral offenses, it sparked something,” Rao told me. People’s righteous anger gave them permission to fight back.

Chavez was up to something similar: He made his followers see their discontent as part of a larger story about right and wrong. “Cesar understood that outrage can create cohesion,” Marshall Ganz, who spent 16 years organizing alongside Chavez, told me. “You can’t organize a group of victims. If people only see themselves that way, there’s no sense of agency, no sense of power. But when you tell them that we’re fighting an injustice or an offense to their dignity, they become angry and involved.”

As Chavez’s followers began their march to Sacramento, local police came to block their way. The sight of uniformed cops looming over poor migrants drew attention, and the police soon dispersed. When the marchers continued on, they found families waiting to greet them—and ready to join the protest. By the end of the first week, dozens of families were marching each day. More than 1,000 people welcomed the marchers when they arrived in Fresno. As the group neared Sacramento, the crowds of onlookers ballooned to 10,000.

Newspapers across California and eventually the nation sent correspondents to document the demonstrators singing defiant songs and carrying banners celebrating revolution. As Chavez’s outrage received greater attention, it became contagious. Shops in San Francisco and Los Angeles had already stopped selling products made from grapes farmed in Central California when the march began. Soon, the boycott spread across the nation. As the marchers closed in on

Sacramento, Chavez received a phone call from a grape-growing company. It offered to raise wages and improve conditions in the fields if Chavez's people would stop carrying banners with the company's name on them.

Moral outrage must be closely managed, or it can do more harm than good.

The march did not succeed in extracting every concession Chavez wanted—the strike would go on—but it forced the nation to pay attention to the plight of migrant workers. By the time the protesters arrived in the state capital and celebrated an Easter Mass, Chavez had become the face of the California labor movement, and one of the most famous agitators in America. Today, he is lionized alongside Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi as an embodiment of all the progress that righteous anger can achieve.

“The thing people forget is that the political left were really the ones who perfected the politics of anger,” Ganz told me. “It’s the progressives who figured out that by helping people see injustice, rather than just economics, we become strong.”

Movements don’t emerge from small acrimonies. They require a sense that it isn’t just an individual who wronged us, but a system that must be reformed. “If you can make it a moral crusade, you can win,” Ganz said.

But moral outrage must be closely managed, or it can do more harm than good. Ganz, who eventually became a lecturer at Harvard’s Kennedy School, has spent years teaching people how to use their anger to effect change. Stoking the emotion is easy. Learning how to channel it to useful ends, he told me, is harder. For anger to be productive, at some point, it must stop. Victory often demands compromise. “You have to know how to arouse passions to fuel the fight, and then how to cool everyone down so they’ll accept the deal on the table,” Ganz said.

In 1968, a couple of years after Chavez’s march to Sacramento, with the strike against grape growers still ongoing, a thick fog descended on the California fields, plunging the daily protests into a dreary half-light. Young strikers, impatient at the

pace of progress, began sabotaging produce trucks. There were reports that workers who had crossed picket lines were being threatened. Buildings were set ablaze.

Chavez had consistently preached nonviolence. As the discontent worsened, however, he realized that he was losing control. And so, on a grim February morning, Chavez announced that he was fasting to urge the movement to recommit to its principles. In a small room of an adobe-walled gas station, Chavez consumed only water. He was a small man when his fast started, and as the weeks passed, he withered. Local newscasts began speculating that he might die. The fast continued for a week, then two weeks, then nearly a month. As Chavez starved, the violence in the fields tapered off. When he emerged after 25 days to join a Mass attended by thousands, Robert F. Kennedy prayed with the leader. “The truest act of courage,” a friend said on behalf of an enfeebled Chavez, “is to sacrifice ourselves for others in a totally nonviolent struggle for justice.”

“Cesar had to literally starve himself to stop the outrage and frustration from getting out of control,” Ganz told me. “You have to control and direct the passion, or else it can burn down everything you’ve worked so hard to build,” he said. “I’m not sure if enough people understand that right now.”

To temper the anger of his followers, Cesar Chavez began to fast. He broke the fast 25 days later and joined a Mass attended by thousands, where Robert F. Kennedy prayed with the leader. (Michael Rougier / Life Picture Collection / Getty)

III. The New Anger Merchants

ONE REASON AMERICA IS SO ANGRY is that anger works. When channeled by someone like Cesar Chavez, it can lift up the disadvantaged and reshape a nation. But its power is not reserved for the righteous. When less scrupulous leaders tap into our rage and use it for their own ends, the emotion can be turned against us, in ways large and small, often without us even realizing what is going on.

Corporate America, for example, has long sought to profit from our anger. Robert Sutton was a young professor, about to start teaching business at Stanford, when James Averill published his study on Greenfield. For Sutton and others, the idea that you could examine an unruly emotion with scientific rigor was fascinating. Soon he began seeing other papers, with titles such as “Fear, Anger and Risk,” “Anger in the Workplace,” and “Customer Rage.” He began to wonder: Who’s making money on this stuff?

Sutton nosed around and found a debt-collection agency whose executives were as fascinated as he was by the new scholarship on anger. They, too, had read the studies—and were using the social science to get rich. Sutton persuaded the agency to let him enroll in its training program for credit-card debt collectors and then allow him to work the phones alongside its 200 employees, who together made 800,000 calls a month.

“The trick they were teaching was to use anger strategically,” Sutton told me.

“They had it as a formula: when to fake anger, when to cool down, when to give people a bit of forgiveness.” Even when the debtors on the other end of the line sounded friendly, the collectors were trained to pretend they were angry at them. One supervisor told Sutton that in some instances, you have to “slam ’em. I slam ’em against the wall.” He explained that callers needed to hear a “hostile tone,” something that said, “I want the payment today! Express mail!”

The point wasn’t to intimidate the debtors into paying—the strategy was more sophisticated than that. As soon as a debtor started screaming back, the collector would switch tactics and become soothing and accommodating. “The idea was, once you get them angry and aroused, you need to deliver catharsis, a sense of relief. That’s going to make them more likely to pay up,” Sutton told me. One collector recounted to him: “I would say, in a soft voice, ‘Mr. Jones, calm down. Excuse me.’ If you can’t cut the person off, then you should just let them blow their smoke, and then when your chance comes, try and be positive with them. Say, ‘Look, I know you’ve got a problem. I hope nothing I did set you off, because neither of us is going to benefit if we don’t resolve this thing.’”

Corporatized outrage is fundamentally manipulative and tends to further the interests of the already rich and powerful. Rarely is it a force for social good.

“It was incredibly effective,” Sutton told me. “People would be so charged up from getting mad and then so relieved you weren’t blaming them anymore, and so they’d

agree to nearly anything.” The bill collectors knew how to use the debtors’ desire for reconciliation to get them to open their checkbooks. “It’s become standard operating procedure in a lot of corporate America now, when they’re dealing with a certain kind of customer,” Sutton said. “They’ve monetized anger by making it into this tool.”

The bill collectors were hardly alone in exploiting the new understanding of anger. Harvard Business School devoted a course to using anger in negotiations. “There were papers and studies explaining that the way to unite your company is by getting them angry at a common enemy,” Sutton said. Take, for instance, a moment in 1997 when Apple had (temporarily) fallen on hard times and Michael Dell had suggested that the company should simply fold and return what cash it had to shareholders. When an audience member at a company-wide meeting asked Steve Jobs about the comment, he replied, “Fuck Michael Dell.” It was galvanizing—whether Jobs intended it to be or not.

Corporatized outrage can be remarkably effective, but it’s fundamentally manipulative, and tends to further the interests of the already rich and powerful, often at the expense of the little guy. Rarely is it a force for social good. Nowhere has that been more evident than in the media industry. If the bill collectors figured out how to use interpersonal anger to their advantage, the cable-news business perfected the monetization of moral outrage.

In 1987, a television reporter named Geraldo Rivera began hosting a daytime talk show. It failed to attract much attention in its first year. Then he tried a new formula, inviting white supremacists, skinheads, and black and Jewish activists into his studio, all at the same time. A brawl broke out. The set was trashed; punches were thrown; Rivera’s nose got broken. The episode was a hit.

Cable news didn’t immediately sink to the same depths, but the influence of the daytime shout-fests was undeniable, especially once Fox News and MSNBC entered the fray, in 1996. Broadcast news had been constrained by regulations that enforced fairness and encouraged decorum. Cable executives, however, could do whatever they wanted. One former Fox producer I spoke with said that his network

realized early on that if watching anger was entertaining, then getting a chance to participate in it—hearing your indignations given voice by a bombastic host—was irresistible.

This was the model of one of Fox's early hits, *The O'Reilly Report*, in which host Bill O'Reilly spent each episode airing his grievances: against elitist academics who questioned America's fealty to its ideals, against the liberal media establishment, and, a bit later, against people who said "Happy holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." Rush Limbaugh had pioneered a similar approach on talk radio, but whereas he also devoted airtime to advancing conservative political principles, O'Reilly made resentment the main event.

Executives from other cable-news channels publicly disdained his approach—and rushed to imitate it. In 2009, a Tufts University study of opinion media found that "100 percent of TV episodes and 98.8 percent of talk radio programs contained outrage." On MSNBC, commentators such as Chris Matthews, Keith Olbermann, and Rachel Maddow found ratings success by playing on their viewers' discontent, even if they stopped short of borrowing O'Reilly's most demagogic tactics. In 2012, Bill Clinton ruefully observed that the network had become "our version of Fox." Later that year, the Pew Research Center found that MSNBC devoted 85 percent of its programming to opinion, and just 15 percent to news. At Fox, the split was 55/45.

The method at both networks was, and is, to tap into our reservoirs of moral indignation. But the point isn't to start a social movement or really even to effect political change, though the programming on Fox News and MSNBC does have political consequences. The point is to keep viewers tuned in, which means keeping them angry all the time. No reconciliation, no catharsis, no compromise.

The more recent rise of social media has only further inflamed our emotions. Facebook and Twitter don't create content; they've outsourced that work to their users, who have quickly noticed that extreme statements attract more attention. On social media, the old rewards of anger—recognition of our unhappiness, resolution of our complaints—are replaced with new ones: retweets, likes, more followers,

more influence. The targets of our rage, meanwhile, tend to be strangers less inclined to hear us out than to fire back. It's a vicious cycle for users, though a virtuous one for the social-media companies, which profit from our engagement.

This isn't to say that these platforms can't harness our anger toward more productive ends. The democratic nature of social media has given previously marginalized groups new outlets to express their outrage and to translate anger into action. The Women's March originated and was organized on Facebook. Lawyers relied on Twitter and Facebook for help mobilizing in support of immigrants to the U.S. when the Trump administration first implemented its travel ban.

But the political actors who use anger to more cynical ends still have the upper hand. Political consultants have long been among the most devoted proselytizers of rage. "If you can map an electorate's fears, and then turn those into anger by moralizing your opponent's sins, they'll show up at the polls," Steve Jarding, a Democratic campaign guru who teaches at Harvard's Kennedy School, told me. "The essence of campaigns today is anger and fear. That's how you win."

"Willie Horton was the start of it all," Jarding said. In 1988, the presidential candidate George H. W. Bush, at the suggestion of his campaign manager, Lee Atwater, added a line to his stump speech claiming that his opponent, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, had helped a convicted murderer, an African American, leave prison on a weekend pass; while out, the man raped a young woman and stabbed her fiancé. The Bush campaign aired television ads featuring Horton's mug shot, playing on racial animosity. Dukakis's numbers collapsed.

Bush's campaign "proved that anger is the most powerful way to motivate people to vote," Jarding said. Anger is now *de rigueur* on the campaign trail, weaponized by Republicans and Democrats alike. Consultants to Barack Obama's presidential campaign told me their motto—"Change we can believe in"—was chosen, in part, because the phrase subtly embraced the anger so many voters felt: Other candidates had promised change, but never delivered. (As an African American candidate, Obama had to use anger carefully, given ugly "angry black man"

stereotypes. His would-be successor, Hillary Clinton, found herself similarly constrained by misogynistic stereotypes.)

All of this anger-mongering in campaigns, whether subtle or overt, has had a corrosive effect on American democracy. A poll by *The Washington Post* found that 35 percent of voters in battleground districts of the 2018 midterm election chose the word *angry* to describe their feelings about the campaign; 24 percent chose *patriotic*. “The thing about political professionals is, we get to leave after the campaign is over,” the pollster Jeffrey Pollock told me. “[We] don’t have to worry about what comes after the election.” These professionals aren’t moral crusaders, as Cesar Chavez was; they’re hired guns. After a long campaign, Pollock said, there’s “this huge group of passionate, energized people” who don’t know where to direct their anger.

As Chavez learned, that’s a perilous state of affairs. Without anyone to channel that anger, it can turn into a destructive obsession. And that’s when things can really get out of control.

IV. The Revenge Impulse

IN THE FALL OF 2017, Larry Cagle, an English teacher in Tulsa, Oklahoma, became so furious that he started plotting to throw his school into chaos. Schools had lost more than \$300 million in state funding over the past decade. Cagle taught at Edison Prep, one of Tulsa’s best public schools, but even there, instructors were sometimes prevented from turning on the heat in the winter or air conditioners in the summer. Teachers in other cities said they didn’t have enough textbooks or taught in buildings infested with rats. Many of Oklahoma’s schools, to save money, were open only four days a week. “My take-home check is \$1,980 a month,” Cagle told me. In Florida, where he taught previously, it was almost twice that amount. “I have three kids in college. I’m driving a car that’s 14 years old and has 200,000 miles and a broken windshield that I can’t afford to replace. We can’t live like this.”

Cagle had been so angry at the school system for so long that his wife had instituted a rule: No ranting at the dinner table. Eventually, he decided he needed to do

something. He emailed a few colleagues and asked, *What if everyone called in sick on the same day?* “All it would take was six teachers, and if we all called in during the middle of the night, there’s no way the district would be able to find enough substitutes,” Cagle recalled. “It would cause total havoc.”

The idea of causing such a disruption would have once seemed abhorrent to Cagle. But his faith in the institutions he normally relied on—Edison Prep’s administration, the school board, elected officials—had been shaken. He had complained to people in power, had volunteered on school-board campaigns, had filed grievances with his union, had tried to explain to parents why they ought to demand more for their kids. None of it had worked.

So Cagle persuaded five colleagues to call in sick one night and, just as he’d surmised, the school went into crisis, with classes canceled and the principal’s office deluged with phone calls from parents asking why their child had spent the entire day in the gym. Cagle began recruiting teachers at other schools. He’d read that terrorists organized themselves into cells. “People were really scared they were going to get fired,” he said. “So I’d tell them, ‘Don’t give me the names of the people in your cell. Just make it happen.’ Then we had 50 teachers call out sick one day, and I called one of the television-news stations and I said, ‘Let me tell you [why these teachers are so pissed off](#).’”

After the story aired, Cagle began receiving emails and messages on social media—first dozens, then hundreds—from educators all around the state. At the time, newspapers were filled with stories of teachers walking out of classrooms in West Virginia, demanding higher pay and more resources. Kentucky and Colorado were also headed toward teacher strikes. In Oklahoma, oil workers began staging their own “sick-outs,” and the governor, concerned about a contagion effect, pushed through a pay raise for educators—an average of \$6,100 per teacher. But the bill included only limited funds to improve the schools.

The teachers were far from mollified. They decided to hold a massive, statewide walkout. After coordinating via email, text message, Facebook, and Twitter, thousands of teachers across the state left their classrooms on Monday, April 2,

2018. Principals were forced to close hundreds of schools. Parents had to hire babysitters or stay at home. The striking teachers initially didn't have much of a plan; they hardly had a set of coherent demands. They were just fed up and wanted everyone to know it. On the first morning of the protest, a few thousand teachers descended on the state capitol in Oklahoma City. Television cameras showed up, and people began posting photos online. The strike stretched through the rest of the week, and then into the next. As many as 80,000 people attended the demonstrations. "It's like a volcano, you know?" Cagle told me. "There's only so much pressure that builds up and then everything blows."

Cagle's wife and daughter—who had just been hired by one of the school-board members he was attacking in the press—begged him to stop marching and giving interviews. "I was having a lot of arguments at home," Cagle told me. "I wanted to stop, but I couldn't stop feeling so angry all the time." Cagle would try to think about something else, but his mind would return, almost unbidden, to his grievances. "I knew it was hurting my family," Cagle said, "but all I could think about was punishing the people who had made me angry for so long."

A protest in Oklahoma City during a statewide teacher walkout in April 2018. The striking teachers initially didn't have much of a plan. But they were fed up, and they wanted everyone to know it. (Scott Heins / Getty)

RESearchers call the phenomenon in which anger, rather than making things better, becomes a cycle of recrimination, rumination, and ever-expanding fury the revenge impulse.

Though anger and the desire for revenge can feel intertwined, they are two distinct emotions. Simply becoming angry doesn't prompt a revenge impulse. Thomas Tripp, a professor at Washington State University who has studied how revenge can affect the workplace, told me that revenge is much more common if there is "a sense that the fairness of institutions, what we call procedural justice, has broken down." When people believe that social institutions are functioning, they're much less likely to feel vengeful urges. One study, for instance, found that when laid-off workers believed firings were handled fairly—that a process was adhered to, that seniority was respected, that worker evaluations were properly considered—they were less likely to protest or complain, even if they disagreed with the outcome. Alternately, if workers believed that managers were playing favorites or

manipulating the rule book, sabotage was more likely. “Think about presidential elections,” Tripp said. “Every four years, roughly half the nation is deeply disappointed. So why don’t they get out their pitchforks? Because as long as they believe it was a fair fight, they tolerate losing. But when both the process and the outcome seem unfair, that’s when we see riots.”

It makes a certain evolutionary sense that the desire for revenge would be coded into us as an emotion of last resort. Good anger, as James Averill demonstrated, encourages us to air our grievances and find solutions. A leader like Cesar Chavez can reframe anger as moral indignation, which can extend the power of personal grievances into an instrument for the pursuit of a more just world. But when we come to believe that justice is impossible, we get the desire for revenge. We no longer expect our anger to be heard; we don’t express ourselves with the hope of finding accommodation. Rather, some people become willing to do *anything* to advance their interests, regardless of who is standing in the way. “When we want revenge, we keep going until we feel like we’ve taught the other person a lesson,” Tripp said. “The goal is to hurt the other person.”

It also makes sense that this emotion ought to be rare, because the desire for revenge can be exceedingly destructive. In many cases, the targets feel violated themselves. They are now injured, and may start seeking revenge of their own. People begin taking justice into their own hands, because they think institutions cannot provide it.

To Larry Cagle, it often felt like the school system, the state government, and even his union were conspiring to stoke his anger, without any promise of relief. After the strikes had kept schools closed for half a month, the teachers’ union called a press conference. Its leadership had decided to throw in the towel. “The legislature has fallen short on funding the promise for the future of education in our state,” said the head of the Oklahoma Education Association, Alicia Priest. Teachers should return to their classrooms. Anyone who missed another day of work might be fired.

This felt like a “gut punch,” Cagle told me. “It was treasonous for them to end it like they did, without asking all of us if we wanted to stop.” Though they returned to their classrooms, Cagle and other educators quickly began posting criticisms of the union’s leaders—and the teachers who supported them—on Facebook and Twitter. Soon afterward, Cagle found a flyer in his classroom. A few years earlier, he’d been arrested for drunk driving; someone had gone to city hall and photocopied his arrest record, and was handing it out to teachers and parents. His mug shot was posted on Facebook. Cagle suspected pro-union teachers.

“It was awful,” Cagle said. “I had to tell my students about the arrest, about what had happened. It was the most shameful day I’ve ever had in a classroom, and the worst part was knowing it was other teachers who wanted to destroy me.”

The teacher strikes of 2018 [won concessions in some states](#). In Oklahoma, the results were mixed. The walkouts inspired a number of educators to run for political office and drew attention to classroom problems that had languished for years. But the protests have yet to produce higher salaries than what was promised before the walkout, or additional school resources. And they damaged relationships with lawmakers that teachers will need in the future. A Republican state representative named Kevin McDugle—whom Cagle publicly described as “douchebag No. 1”—had been fighting for teacher raises for years. “I voted for every tax proposal for a teacher raise that came before us,” McDugle told me. “You know what that cost me politically? And this is what I get in return? I’m of half a mind to say screw these people. They’re gonna get what they deserve.”

It seems like our current madness should be reaching its apex, but the sources of our anger run deeper than the present political moment.

Since the protests have ended, Cagle has had a lot of time to think about what happened. Some might feel regret, believe that things got out of hand. Not him. He wishes everyone had fought longer and harder. This summer, he told me he’d been

collecting gossip about adversaries' sexual indiscretions to use as leverage in the next fight. (He later denied doing so.) Whatever faith he had left in the system has evaporated. He doesn't describe what he feels as a desire for revenge; he says he is focused on trying to make things better, to improve the school system. But in our conversations, he often seemed past the point of compromise. "Next school year, we'll force everyone to realize this fight isn't over," he told me over the summer. "I hate to say it, but sometimes you have to burn something down to save it."

THOUGH IT IS ugly to admit, you may have felt similarly to Larry Cagle at some point in your life. You may have lost faith in Congress, your house of worship, your employer. Perhaps you feel so angry at times that screaming isn't sufficient; you want to make someone else scream. Like Cagle, you may be nearing a point where you are past constructive solutions. You, too, may want to burn it all down.

This is a scary place to be—for us as individuals, and for the nation as a whole. The ways in which anger is constantly stoked from every side is new, and the partisan divide that such anger fosters may have pushed us further down a path toward widespread violence than we realize. One recent working paper found that the more partisan people become, the more likely they are to rationalize violence against those they don't agree with, to experience *schadenfreude* or moral disinterest when they see an opponent get attacked, and even to endorse physical assaults on other groups. "Though most Americans reject violence, as more of us embrace strong partisanship, the prevalence of lethal partisanship is likely to grow," wrote the political scientists Lilliana Mason and Nathan Kalmoe.

We should, in other words, be worried, perhaps even more than we already are. It seems like our current madness should be reaching its apex, that relief ought to be on the horizon. But the sources of our anger run deeper than the present political moment.

Cable news, Twitter, politicians who now do more campaigning than governing—their every incentive is to keep us angry. But we own some of the guilt, too.

I'm not proud to admit that I know what it feels like to relish seeing an opponent get his comeuppance. I profess to hate what cable news is doing to the national conversation, but I still tune in. I decry the nasty discourse on Twitter, then check back the next hour to refresh my outrage. I deplore the nation's rank partisanship, but I rarely split my ballot.

My anger has become a burden. Perhaps yours has too. And yet we can't turn away. The anger impulse is too deeply encoded, the thrill too genuine. So where do we go from here?

V. A Better Use for our Fury

THE PLAN, ON THE FACE OF IT, seemed crazy. A group of Israeli social scientists wanted to conduct an experiment disguised as an advertising campaign. The ads would run in a small, conservative Tel Aviv suburb, where many people were religious and supported right-wing politicians. The goal was to persuade the residents to abandon their anger toward Palestinians and agree that Israel should freeze construction of Jewish settlements in Gaza and the West Bank, among other concessions.

The suburb they were hoping to convert, Giv'at Shmuel, was known for being strenuously opposed to anything associated with peaceniks, liberals, or anyone who said anything good about peaceniks or liberals. A few years earlier, residents had stood along a highway to throw rocks at passing cars simply because they suspected that the drivers might be headed to a gay-pride march.

The proposed experiment ran counter to most of psychology's conventional teachings. The best-known theory regarding how to reduce conflict and prejudice within a population was known as the "contact hypothesis": If you can just get everyone who hates each other to talk in a controlled, respectful manner, this doctrine holds, they'll eventually start speaking civilly. They won't like each other. But prejudices may fade, and moral outrages will mellow.

The researchers figured that the contact hypothesis had clearly been developed by someone who had never visited Israel. Polls in Giv'at Shmuel were very clear. The residents didn't want to spend time with Palestinians. They also didn't want a bunch of academics lecturing them on how to become more open-minded. So the researchers came up with a clever idea. Don't tell everyone in Giv'at Shmuel that they're wrong. Tell them that they're right: A perpetual war with Israel's neighbors made a lot of sense. If anything, the people of Giv'at Shmuel ought to be angrier.

With the help of an advertising agency, the social scientists created online ads celebrating the tension between Israelis and Palestinians, and extolling the virtues of fighting for fighting's sake. One ad showed iconic photos of Israeli war heroes and proclaimed, "Without [war] we wouldn't have had heroes. For the heroes, we probably need the conflict." The ad was scored with Wagner's "Flight of the Valkyries." Another ad featured footage of a soldier with a machine gun petting a kitten and an infantryman helping an old man cross the street. "What a Wonderful World" played in the background. Its tagline read, "Without [war] we would never be moral. For morality, we probably need the conflict." The ads, along with brochures and billboards, began appearing in Giv'at Shmuel in 2015. Over a six-week period, according to polling, nearly all of its 25,000 residents saw them.

Three days after the experiment started, the so-called Lone Wolf Intifada began, a wave of violent assaults across Israel that the researchers figured would make the people of Giv'at Shmuel even more polarized. And yet, when the researchers conducted polls in the suburb at the end of the advertising campaign, the residents who had held the most extreme views at the outset of the experiment appeared to have softened. The percentage of right-leaning residents who said that Arabs were solely responsible for Israel's past wars decreased by 23 percent. The number of conservatives who said Israel should be more aggressive toward Palestinians fell by 17 percent. Incredibly, even though the advertisements never mentioned settlements, 78 percent more people said that Israel should consider freezing construction in the West Bank and Gaza. (Residents in nearby towns who hadn't seen the ads were surveyed as a control; they showed no such evolution in their views over the same period.)

A year after the ads had ceased, by which time some residents had trouble recalling the specifics of the campaign, polls still showed greater tolerance. The campaign wasn't a panacea, but it is among the most successful conflict interventions in contemporary social science.

The campaign worked, the social scientists believe, because instead of telling people they were wrong, the ads agreed with them—to embarrassing, offensive extremes. “No one wants to think of themselves as some angry crank,” one of the researchers, Eran Halperin, told me. “No one wants to be lumped in with extremists or the angriest fringe.” Sometimes, however, we don't realize we've become extremists until someone makes it painfully obvious.

AS AMERICA REACHES the midpoint of a presidential administration that has driven nearly everyone into a rage of one kind or another, we are at a crossroads: Will we continue, blindly furious? Or will we see our rage as a disease that must be cured? The goal shouldn't be to eradicate anger. We couldn't if we tried, and as James Averill's study showed, we *need* our anger. We need it to air our grievances with our friends, family, and colleagues. We also need the moral outrage that motivates citizens to push for a more just society. Neither the left nor the right has a monopoly on justice; likewise, injustice can come from either side. But, in particular, people who have historically been denied the right to express their anger—the women of the #MeToo movement, the activists of Black Lives Matter—shouldn't be expected to give up the fight now.

Still, we can't maintain this fever pitch, or we will risk forfeiting the gains that good anger can bring. The most immediate task is to recognize our anger for what it often is. The researchers in Israel held up a mirror to the residents of Giv'at Shmuel in the hopes that the reflection would shock them. Americans would benefit from taking a similarly hard look at their reflection—and we don't need to enlist the help of social scientists to do so. In a sense, all of America has been living in Giv'at Shmuel for the past two years. The things the president says at his rallies are so extreme that they are essentially absurdist provocations. Antifa activists are brawling in the streets with the Proud Boys. The vitriol on display each night on

cable news—and even on late-night comedy shows—is over the top. And no matter your political persuasion, your Facebook feed likely contains posts that would make the ads in Giv’at Shmuel look sober.

When we scrutinize the sources of our anger, we should see clearly that our rage is often being stoked not for our benefit but for someone else’s. If we can stop and see the anger merchants’ self-serving motives, we can perhaps start to loosen their grip on us.

Yet we can’t pin the blame entirely on the anger profiteers. At the heart of much of our discontent is a very real sense that our government systems are broken. Larry Cagle wasn’t wrong to be livid at a state government that refused to allocate funds to educate the next generation of Oklahomans; his mistake was succumbing to the view that the only way to fix the system was to destroy it.

Many of the nation’s most contentious issues are driven by a feeling that our institutions have failed us. Historically, this feeling has been at the root of some of America’s most important movements for change. Ours, too, could be a moment for progress, if we can channel our anger to good ends, rather than the vanquishing of our enemies.

“It is not enough for people to be angry,” Martin Luther King Jr. told an audience at Carnegie Hall in February 1968. It was the 100th anniversary of the birth of W. E. B. Du Bois, and King hoped to remind those in attendance of his teachings, but also of his methods. Du Bois, King said, had been an angry radical his whole life. He had furiously called for resistance. But he had also sought to make his enemies into allies. He had overcome his anger in the hopes of finding peace.

As King spoke, protests were happening in New York and Paris. Soldiers were dying in Vietnam. Just over a month later, King would be assassinated in Memphis.

“Above all, he did not content himself with hurling invectives for emotional release and then to retire into smug, passive satisfaction,” King said to the crowd about Du Bois. “The supreme task is to organize and unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force.”

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