

# Heated Indignation Entrepreneurship Hinders Sober Constructive Change

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I am writing these lines in Europe, while observing with concern how the polarisation of the American society increasingly also comes to Europe.<sup>1</sup> I see an escalation of ‘emotionalised indignation rituals’ on all sides of the political spectrum, from the identitarian movement on the right side,<sup>2</sup> to identity politics on the left side.<sup>3</sup> Sober and calm systemic change on the ground is hindered when emotional energy is absorbed by indignation entrepreneurship that uses legitimate grievances as a ‘resource’, be they grievances concerning economic inequality or social discrimination.

Addressing these grievances effectively should have been the task of the left side, yet, as self-critical voices point out, the left has largely failed its own mission. We hear from England that ‘a sense of rage and humiliation’ has developed ‘in the traditional working class’ along with ‘the rise of right-wing nationalism and authoritarian populism’, while ‘social democratic parties should have been the vehicle to address the grievances’.<sup>4</sup> Social democratic parties ‘lost their way’, we learn, by bowing to ‘Thatcherism and liberal individualism’, and in this way, they damaged ‘the dignity of labour’.<sup>5</sup> In Germany, an author of the left political spectrum calls on her friends to return to solidarity with the weakest in society more inclusively than through ‘emotionalised indignation rituals’ of self-righteous ‘identity politics’ and ‘cancel culture’.<sup>6</sup>

The coronavirus pandemic could be called a historical test that shows how resilient or vulnerable societies are. I am reminded of a story that a friend shared with me in October 2002, a veterinarian who works in Scandinavia.<sup>7</sup> This is the story: At a conference about artificial insemination, an American speaker explained that his research showed that bulls produce higher quality semen when it is procured with an artificial vagina rather than through the use of electro-ejaculation, whereby the bull receives a small electroshock to trigger ejaculation. The drawback with the artificial vagina is that the bull has to be trained to use it. After the talk, to my friend’s great astonishment, the American speaker and his colleagues explained that they would continue with electro-ejaculation. My friend, flabbergasted, asked his American colleagues whether they knew that electro-ejaculation was banned in Norway and Sweden for ethical reasons. The answer he received was, ‘We are Americans, we are free to do what we want!’ My friend was speechless. He sighed to me, ‘This is the freedom of the fool who cuts off the branch on which he sits. How can foolishness be freedom? How can anybody be so haughty to believe that ‘freedom’ means power over the limitations of nature? These people are so blinded by their arrogance in regard to nature that they do not recognise that a little humility would serve their interests much better! These people humiliate their animals and in my eyes also themselves’. The Scandinavian veterinarian clearly had heard nature’s call for humility, while his American colleagues had not.

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic provides a global opportunity for people to sigh in astonishment, and a young author hailing from Pakistan is flabbergasted when he sees ‘toxic Western individualism’.<sup>8</sup> His message resonates with the work of psychologist Jean Twenge who has studied the self-esteem movement in the United States for many years, and warns that it has led to a kind of ‘dukes up’ narcissism of entitlement.<sup>9</sup>

To my grief, the coronavirus pandemic invites people to use also the argument of humiliation for the construction of conspiratorial narratives. Conspiracy theorists typically start by allegedly

‘exposing’ the ‘official story’ as a cover-up,<sup>10</sup> and then they portray the virus as a vehicle for dominators to humiliate humanity into submission. The argument could be turned around, of course, by saying that whoever does indeed use the pandemic for goals other than health — for the primacy of profit, for instance<sup>11</sup> — will be delighted to see people being distracted by profit-driven agitation machines that exploit people’s psychological vulnerabilities and reward whoever feels ‘lust for combat’, or needs recognition for unresolved personal trauma, or seeks justifications for ‘crybully’ behaviour. The emotional and economic advantages of heated polarisations are indeed substantial.<sup>12</sup> Entrepreneurs of all kinds use the pandemic as a resource that can be exploited and monetised — ‘smaller profiteers’ try to profit from the suffering caused by ‘larger profiteers’.<sup>13</sup>

The following is a prayer attributed to theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. ‘Father, give us courage to change what must be altered, serenity to accept what cannot be helped, and the insight to know the one from the other’.<sup>14</sup> I call on humanity to strive for serenity by taking a step back and cool down so that forward-looking dialogue becomes possible instead of ever more cycles of humiliation.<sup>15</sup> Moderation, cooling down, unexcited solidarity, this is what is needed, as only this can contain humiliation entrepreneurship.<sup>16</sup> The global community carries the responsibility to explain to everyone that due humility should not be mistaken for undue humiliation.

## References

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The United States have grown more polarised since the 1970s, with rapid increases during the 2000s. See, among others, *The impact of increased political polarization*, by Frank Newport, Gallup, 5th December 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/268982/impact-increased-political-polarization.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> The identitarian movement in Europe overlaps ideologically with the American alt-right movement.

<sup>3</sup> Identity politics attempt to protect people from oppression based on their various identities.

<sup>4</sup> See, among others, ‘Jon Cruddas: “Labour is in danger of becoming dominated by the meritocratic elite”’, interview by Julian Coman, *The Guardian*, 11th April 2021, [www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/apr/11/jon-cruddas-dignity-of-labour-meritocratic-elite-interview](http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/apr/11/jon-cruddas-dignity-of-labour-meritocratic-elite-interview). Jon Cruddas criticises that ‘the left’s preoccupations have narrowed over the years to a preoccupation with individual rights and equalities’, while ‘all that desire is still out there today’ that has ‘a focus on the dignity of one’s work, on solidarity, fraternity and family. On community’. I thank Rigmor Johnsen for making me aware of this article.

<sup>5</sup> Jon Cruddas, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> Sahra Wagenknecht, 2021. English translation of the German title, *The self-righteous: My counter-program - for community spirit and solidarity*.

## Notes

<sup>7</sup> I shared this story in my book *Making enemies: Humiliation and international conflict*, Lindner, 2006, pp. 40–41.

<sup>8</sup> ‘How the Western world failed at stopping the pandemic: The west’s inaction let Covid spin out of control — and now it’s paying the price’, by Umair Haque, *Eudaimonia*, 22nd October 2020, <https://eand.co/how-the-western-world-failed-at-stopping-the-pandemic-711443a0e081>. See also note 37 in chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> See note 162 in chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Why do some people believe in conspiracy theories?’ by Thea Buckley, *Scientific American*, 1st July 2015, [www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-do-some-people-believe-in-conspiracy-theories/](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-do-some-people-believe-in-conspiracy-theories/): Not all conspiracy theories are false, some may indeed turn out to be true. ‘The point is that some individuals may have a tendency to find such theories attractive. The crux of the matter is that conspiracists are not really sure what the true explanation of an event is — they are simply certain that the “official story” is a cover-up’. See also ‘People drawn to conspiracy theories share a cluster of psychological features: Baseless theories threaten our safety and democracy. It turns out that specific emotions make people prone to such thinking’, by Melinda Wenner Moyer, *Scientific American* March 2019, [www.scientificamerican.com/article/people-drawn-to-conspiracy-theories-share-a-cluster-of-psychological-features/](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/people-drawn-to-conspiracy-theories-share-a-cluster-of-psychological-features/).

<sup>11</sup> See ‘The U.S. tried to build a new fleet of ventilators. The mission failed’, by Nicholas Kulish, Sarah Kliff and Jessica Silver-Greenberg, *New York Times*, 29th March 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/business/coronavirus-us-ventilator-shortage.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/29/business/coronavirus-us-ventilator-shortage.html). I thank Linda Hartling for sharing this article. See also ‘Fake news machine gears up for 2020’, *CNN Money*, 29th April 2020, <https://money.cnn.com/interactive/media/the-macedonia-story/>.

See, furthermore, ‘Countries urge drug companies to share vaccine know-how’, by Maria Cheng and Lori Hinnant, *The Associated Press (AP) News*, 1st March 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/drug-companies-called-share-vaccine-info-22d92afbc3ea9ed519be007f8887bcf6>. See a discussion of TRIPS, the World Trade Organisation’s agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, in Braithwaite and Drahos, 2002, where they deem it to be ‘information feudalism’. Braithwaite and Drahos wonder why the world outside of the United States, the European Community, and Japan, agreed with TRIPS in April 1994, even though they had nothing much to gain. The explanation, ‘They did so because of a failure of democratic processes, both nationally and internationally’. See also ‘Who owns the knowledge economy? Political organising behind TRIPS’, by Peter Drahos with John Braithwaite, *Corner House Briefing* 32, 30th September 2004, [www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/who-owns-knowledge-economy](http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resource/who-owns-knowledge-economy). It is a privilege to have John Braithwaite as an esteemed member in the global advisory board of our Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies fellowship.

<sup>12</sup> *The impact of increased political polarization*, by Frank Newport, Gallup, 5th December 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/268982/impact-increased-political-polarization.aspx>:

...a strong emotional allegiance to one’s political and ideological reference group can have significantly positive effects for individuals, who gain meaning and purpose in life from social solidarity with an in-group while railing against threatening enemies. Partisan ‘us versus them’ perspectives are easier for many individuals to handle cognitively than are complex approaches to issues and situations that attempt to take into account multiple pluses and minuses.

And importantly, there are real economic benefits for businesses that can take advantage of and monetise the behaviours of emotionally driven partisans seeking reinforcement for their views. Among these beneficiaries: cable news networks, talk show hosts, book publishers, bloggers and podcast producers.

And, of course, politicians gain support and maximise turnout when their constituents can be emotionally activated on the basis of perceived threats. As political consultants advise clients, negative campaigning is most often much more effective than efforts to remain positive.

<sup>13</sup> The ‘great reset’ conspiracy narrative, for instance, has appropriated the ‘shock doctrine’ of Naomi Klein, 2007. It is like a container for many smaller conspiracy theories to gather under its umbrella. See, among others, ‘How the “great reset” of capitalism became an anti-lockdown conspiracy’, by Quinn Slobodian, *The Guardian*, 4th December 2020, [www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/dec/04/great-reset-capitalism-became-anti-lockdown-conspiracy](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/dec/04/great-reset-capitalism-became-anti-lockdown-conspiracy).

<sup>14</sup> ‘You can quote them’, by Fred Shapiro, *Yale Alumni Magazine*, Jan/Feb 2010, <https://yalealumnimagazine.com/articles/2709-you-can-quote-them>.

**Notes**

<sup>15</sup> *Making enemies: Humiliation and international conflict*, Lindner, 2006, pp. 176–177.

<sup>16</sup> See my book *Making enemies: Humiliation and international conflict*, Lindner, 2006, chapter 8: ‘The humiliation antidote — Calm down, no stress! How bystanders can stand up’. See also ‘UN urges people to pause before sharing information online’, *United Nations News*, 20th October 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075742>. See, furthermore, Reicher, et al., 2005, for ‘entrepreneurs of hate and entrepreneurs of solidarity’, and Reicher, et al., 2016, for ‘tyranny and leadership’.