1. The problem

Ressentiment is a reclaim, so old we have forgotten who we have a claim against, but we cannot forget the original grievance which endures through time and becomes a permanent, incurable disease.

It is a psychological disease, socially endemic and a historical process of destruction of values. According to all authors reviewed, it is incurable at all dimensions. Eruptions of the symptoms of the disease are revolts, according to Nietzsche who coined the very politically incorrect phrase: ‘The revolt of the slaves’.

Scheler characterizes it as a repeated experience and reliving of negative, hostile emotions which are recurrently repressed due to a felt impotence to ventilate or satisfy them. It is understood as a phenomenon and an emotional process that proceeds by phases of repression and transformation of emotions which sink deeply into the center of the personality until they are removed from consciousness and rational control. When the emotion surfaces it is experienced as a renewal of both the original grievance and the feeling of impotence.

Once an individual, a society or a historical process arrives at the stage of ressentiment, there is no cure and no hope of reversing the process. That is the view that the standard literature sustains. That is the problem.

It is a difficult problem for, as posed by the authors on the subject, it is an irrefutable statement, almost a truism. One intuits it is true; and by general observation one sees it confirmed, but we cannot prove it wrong. If someone, suffering from the disease, is faring well in life, the disease might enter a latent mode, but as soon as something goes wrong, ressentiment will resurface as an internal devouring emotion, erupting from the most profound layer of the personality; like a monster coming from a distant past; like a persistent virus which will spread and infect individual, social and political behavior. Even when we do not see the symptoms the sickness is there. It is endemic and epidemic; contagious and self-replicating. As ressentiment implies the denial of values, of life and its creative forces, the death of God in human life, or nihilism, it can drive societies towards decay (Scheler 1915) or through revolt to the installation of a reign of mediocrity, corruption and historical nihilism (Nietzsche, the Antichrist (A); Camus 1951).
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History offers so many examples of this persistent disorder and its social effects that one comes to the conclusion, with Nietzsche, that it is a most important historical drive. And when one lives through disruptive and violent historical events, one can only wonder at fathomless emotions. Such was Unamuno’s consternation at the Spanish Civil War: 'As Russia, Spain is a nation of resentful people. Resentment against God. Why?'

The 21st century ushered the doctrine of human rights into an ecumenical worldview, which meant not only growing expectations in every human being on the planet, but also the belief that the world had reached a common understanding around a set of values: freedom, equality and justice within the best political form ever devised – democracy. Fukuyama dared to call that universal consensus around democracy, the end of history, ‘… a form of society that satisfied its deepest and most fundamental longings’ (Fukuyama, 1992: xii). However, dramatic events, like the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack in US, showed soon enough that old grudges are rarely put to rest, and are interpreted as irreconcilable differences in values, and as justifying killings, wars, revolutions.

The events of 9/11 were not only the most spectacular terrorist action, but also a loud reminder of grudges that go back centuries, regardless of political forms and ideological evolution. But Islamic terrorism is only a modality of the many faces of today’s resentment. It is not a problem of clashes between civilizations, as Samuel Huntington put it (1997), but of emotional clashes both within and between national communities, even within kin groups.

Rwanda’s 1994 genocide is a tragic example. The Hutu majority had succeeded to power in 1962 ousting the Tutsi minority that had ruled from the 15th century. But getting power was not enough to resolve emotions that had been incubating for years, and it was from a position of power, 30 years later, that the Hutus unleashed the violence which killed close to a million Tutsis, who retaliated, in their turn, causing thousands more deaths. It was not a cultural nor a religious clash; not even an ethnic clash. The Tutsis and Hutus speak the same Bantu language, are genetically undifferentiated and had a high rate of intermarriage between the two groups. Their differences are social constructs, reinforced by the German and Belgian colonial rule over Rwanda, and referring more to wealth and social position than to ethnic or cultural distinctions.

Today, the survivor Hutus and Tutsis are trying to coexist and share power, but the genocide, accompanied by brutal acts of rape and sexual violence (close to 500 000 women and girls were raped and 70 percent of those victims were infected with HIV) are a new wound adding to a resentment that will be difficult to dissolve.

The South African post-apartheid experience is another case where the
question of the incurability of ressentiment will be put to the test. It is a most special case because the transition to a democratic and free society from the apartheid system, which was sustained by a white minority over a black majority under the rationale of a legal system, was conducted by a conscientious leadership, aware of the necessity to devise mechanisms that would avoid endless revenge and bloodshed, both during and after the transition to general elections and a new constitution. The creation of a legal framework for the indemnification of offenders and the activities of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) offered not only an alternative to prosecution and retaliatory justice, which would encumber negotiations during the transition, but, most importantly, it addressed two key aspects of ressentiment: the helplessness and shame of victims, vis-à-vis the guilt of victimizers, and the uncertainty of meanings and values which, as we will discuss in depth throughout these pages, is the most damaging social effect of ressentiment. By conditioning amnesty on truth-telling and public recognition of crimes, in face-to-face encounters between victims and victimizers, the TRC allowed for both accountability and forgiveness within a mutual recognition of all as equal human beings.

By offering conditional, rather than automatic amnesty, the TRC did impose a degree of accountability on the perpetrators that came forward as they were forced to publicly acknowledge their actions and live with the shame and social ostracisation that might result from their admissions. Furthermore, by permitting the victims the possibility to question those who had harmed them, victims could gain the answers they were seeking and could gain a sense of empowerment relative to the perpetrator. (Mallinder 2009: 136)

Notwithstanding the importance of such efforts, the number of cases whereby such restorative justice could be effected were few, as Mallinder’s paper and other studies have shown. We can only say that it eased the country into a more peaceful transition and allowed for a relatively harmonious installment of the new black rule after the general elections of 1994; and hope that its symbolic power keeps thriving in the spirit of creation of a new order, instead of reverting to revenge and retaliation, and that it may sustain the democratic system until all factors and factions can install a convivial regime.

However, we cannot say as yet that all ressentiment has been cured. By 2011, that emotion seems to be showing its disruptive signs, mostly among the white population and specially within the Afrikaners, who can raise grudges not only against the actual black government and the loss of their supremacy, but also in terms of old wounds inflicted by other white rulers; as in the most special case of the Boers who suffered massacres during the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902) as a result of the British ‘scorched
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The killing in April 2010 of Eugene Terreblanche, the leader of the white supremacist Afrikaner Resistance Movement (AWB), revived Afrikaner hostility towards coexistence with blacks and raised an increasing demand for a separate white Afrikaner homeland. Such demand had started even before the elections, in 1993, through talks with Mandela, and was reinforced by acts such as the settlement of a group of Afrikaners on 180 hectares of land they had bought with the purpose of establishing an independent homeland for Afrikaners, the ‘Boere Republikeine’. It is significant, that such land contains the graves of 27 000 Afrikaners who died in concentration camps during the Second Anglo-Boer war, giving the settlement a historic significance which surpasses present events and cries out to a different old resentment, even if their present rationale is their resistance to living under black rule.

Arizona in the US is rapidly becoming another example of mixed old causes for resentment as the dispute between those who defend the rights of the Mexican immigrants and those who promote laws against immigration reaches extremes like the so-called ‘Arizona Massacre’, in which Jared Lee Loughner killed six people and wounded 11, including Democrat Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, the main target of the attempt because of her opposition to the anti-immigrant laws.

The situation was created by the passing of state law SB1070 (July 2009), which criminalizes the presence and transportation of illegal immigrants in the state. The issue mobilized opposition from the Latin American community, which has become the first minority in US, but also from the liberal Democrats who, like Giffords, speak out against discrimination, while right-wing sectors, like the Tea Party, a movement clearly led by white Anglo Saxons, take a firm stand against immigration.2

Another law (HB2281), adds a new facet to the problem by forbidding schools to offer courses that promote ethnic solidarity, referring to a Program of Mexican Studies in the US (PEME) that was undertaken 10 years ago in Arizona’s school system, responding to the fact that Latin students are almost half of the elementary and high school register. The rationale behind the prohibition seems to be that the PEME promotes resentment against the non-Hispanic whites and it is targeted exclusively to the Latin community.3

The situation is not exclusive to Arizona, and extends to other frontier states like California and New Mexico, where similar anti-immigrant policies have been implemented, including an astoundingly long and costly wall that runs along the whole Mexican–US frontier, creating another division reminiscent of the Berlin Wall and, more recently, Israel’s
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separation barrier in the West Bank. Such barriers can dissuade immigration but cannot quench ressentiment on both sides.

The rejection of anti-immigrant laws has mobilized the Latin American community against the United States in unsuspected ways. The popular Colombian singer, Shakira, has expressed her solidarity with the Latin community in US, declaring ‘That law will unfortunately create more division and ressentiment . . . ’. Words that we can surmise will not be heeded by the US Homeland Security officials that are building the frontier barrier, yet it is a warning that not only the Latin community within the US or at its borders, but all Latin Americans will feel such barriers and anti-immigrant laws (that apply mostly or only to Latin American immigrants) as discrimination and exclusion from lands that, after all, once belonged to Spanish-speaking populations. The issue could easily bring back memories of all the interventions and old grievances committed by the US against Latin American countries, even going back to the Spanish-American War (1898) because that is the nature of ressentiment: it is an emotion that seems to draw from the remotest past to bring to the present grievances that seemed to have been forgotten.

These examples are only a few of today’s conflicts in which old grudges come back amidst new events. Be the color of the skin black, white, yellow or brown, everybody can catch the disease of ressentiment, to the extent that some people are raising that emotion as a valid motive for liberation movements.

Indeed, some post-modern approaches, drawing from Camus, understand ressentiment as a liberating force; it is Nietzsche’s ‘revolt of the slaves’ made into the good revolutionary cause; the liberation of the weak, of the oppressed, of the alienated person. We will be dealing with this matter in depth, suffice to say here that not all rebellions are ressentiment revolts and Camus’ rebellion is not Nietzsche’s revolt but, on the contrary, is akin to Nietzsche’s idea of the expansive spirit of the superior man. Camus’ rebellion is an existential act, it is setting a limit to oppression, limit from which human dignity starts (Camus 1951: 259). Furthermore, for Camus, ressentiment is a form of nihilism which has two alternative results: murder or suicide, as attested by all 20th-century revolutions which have denied the essential, creative, existential principle of rebellions, and followed the path of violence and death, the negation of value, of human dignity, of life itself.

When a condition of impotency prevails, the revolt is not an affirmation of identity or autonomy but a persistent denial of all positive value. Some people read in Nietzsche that ressentiment can be creative and engender values, but the text used to sustain that approach should be taken within the context of the whole paragraph:
The slave revolt in morality begins when the resentment itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the resentment of those beings who are prevented from a genuinely active reaction and who compensate for that with a merely imaginary vengeance. While all noble morality grows out of a triumphant self-affirmation, slave morality from the start says No to what is ‘outside,’ ‘other,’ ‘a non-self’. And this No is its creative act. (GM: I, 10)

As we see, the condition of either real impotency or a self-image of inferiority is fundamental to understanding the difference between a ressentiment revolt and the existentialist revolt, or with the more recent interpretation of ‘post-modern ressentiment’ as a conquest of the other by the simulation of her desire (Baudrillard 1995).

The resentful is weak even when he revolts; he is ‘denied the true reaction’ by his emotion, which is not self constructive but self deprecating and denying of value. The ‘creation’ of the resentful is negative, in the sense that it is not an affirmation of life and self value but a negation of others’ and one’s own values. When someone, in Baudrillard’s sense, conquers the other by simulating her desire, she is not reacting out of ressentiment, she is competing with the other as peer. It is the case of assimilation of cultures after a conquest or oppressive dominium; as seen in the contemporary examples provided by Japan and South Africa.

The problem of the incurability of the disease is not solved by arguing that ressentiment can create value because when people create positive values they are affirming themselves, not negating others; when that happens we can say ressentiment is not the driving emotion.

Surely, psychologists, neurobiologists, biochemists, and other behavioral scientists will come out and state that the proposition of the incurability of ressentiment is false. They will, hopefully, come out with therapies, neurochemical technics, and even drugs, to reprogram human behavior.

Yet, a suspicion holds the assertion of an incurable disease as intuitively true: we see it happen. We see old rancor surge suddenly from people we considered well adjusted and happy; we see wounds that never heal and memories of grievances passing on from generation to generation. Because ressentiment is a historical emotion, it is not bred in the individual but in a sociological, political, historical broth. As Shylock says:

I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.  
He hates our sacred nation, and he rails 
... Cursed be my tribe,  
If I forgive him!  
(Merchant of Venice, I, 3)

Ancient grudges are everywhere and always. Muslims, Armenians, Jews, blacks, women, Latins, Russians, Irish, Scottish, Catalanians,
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Basques, Germans, in an unending list. Wherever there is a contemporary problem, we find ressentiment as an ancient grudge that is never put to rest. Are they really civilization’s faults, that, as Huntington (1997) noted, can never be repaired? Can those ancient grievances ever be resolved?

In the face of an insoluble problem and an irrefutable statement, even more when it seems a truism, we have to reframe the question. Let’s not ask for the cure but rather ask if it is valid to approach this as a ‘disease of the soul’, and, if it is, let’s aim for a description of its phases. Then we can start to ponder over ways to alleviate its symptoms, contain the contagion, and diminish the vulnerability of the sane.

In what follows we will address those questions.