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The Nostalgic Turn and The Politics of Ressentiment

Abstract

The Greatest Generation, Band of Brothers, We Were Soldiers, Nick at Night, and the confederate battle flag. We are looking backward, because looking forward is too problematic. We are living within a global conservative restoration, which has gained intensity since 9/11 and gained further solidification since the most recent elections. Ira Shor elaborated the concept of the conservative restoration in his text, *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration 1969-1984* (1986).

Keywords

Restoration, Nostalgia, Politics, Ressentiment, Passivity

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The Nostalgic Turn and The Politics of *Ressentiment* - Bill Reynolds

The Greatest Generation, Band of Brothers, We Were Soldiers, Nick at Night, and the confederate battle flag. We are looking backward, because looking forward is too problematic. We are living within a global conservative restoration, which has gained intensity since 9/11 and gained further solidification since the most recent elections. Ira Shor elaborated the concept of the conservative restoration in his text, *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration 1969-1984* (1986).

The reinvention of official rule fell to a man with little appeal or imagination, Richard Nixon. He was followed by inept and bland leaders in Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter. The federal executives were thus weak partners in the conservative forces reversing the 1960s. Until picturesque Ronald Reagan taught Washington how to whistle "Dixie" and chew gum at the same time; it was up to big business and the ultra-conservative churches to divert the tide away from protest culture and towards a Golden Age of restoration (Shor, 1986, 6).

The restoration reached its pinnacle during the years of the Reagan presidency. Reagan was followed by a "kinder and gentler" conservatism in George Bush followed by a conservative democratic, William Jefferson Clinton. The restoration continues to predominate thought and consciousness in America as well as globally. 9/11 only added to its apparent urgency as it diverted attention from controversial domestic policies such as health care issues, education, environmental concerns and corporate corruption and moved it to thoughts of homeland security and war (Empire building). It continues to modify its character. A new assemblage, compassionate conservatism, in the personage of George W. Bush, began to emerge in the late 1990s and continues to develop this restoration moment. The events of 9/11 have added additional strength and momentum to a compassionate conservative war on terrorism and a fondness for things past. This assemblage has increasing power in areas of educational, social policy as well as important affects in popular culture.

The power bloc combines business with the New Right and with neo-conservative intellectuals. Its interests are not in increasing the life chances of women, people of color, or labor. Rather it aims at providing educational conditions believed necessary both for international competitiveness, profit, and discipline and for returning us to a romanticized past of the "ideal" home, family, and school (Apple, 1996, 28).

One of the conservative restoration's primary concerns is the elimination of critical or counter-hegemonic thought. There is a distinct distaste for those historical moments of the past when critique was used and flourished. In fact in much of the cultural artifacts (particularly film and music) produced during

the present historical period there has been a rewriting of the memory of that moment of critique (see Reynolds & Gabbard 2003; Giroux 2002). So, that the repetition of and longing for a carefully orchestrated past can occur. An orchestrated past that is filled with memories of small towns, family values, carefully delineated gender roles, fundamental churches and orderly, disciplined and accountable schools. It is nostalgia for that time past when things were certain and clear-cut, a time that never was. Nostalgia flows through the post 9/11 society. This paper will discuss both notions of nostalgia and *ressentiment* and the ways in which they are in evidence in both general political policy and educational agendas.

Nostalgia

Nostalgia is interlaced within this conservative restoration. It is not necessarily a cause or a result of it but is palpably present. Nostalgia is most likely to become magnified when there are times of uncertainty, fragmentation and fear. "Nostalgia (from *nostos* -- return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has ever existed" (Boym, 2001, xiii). It is Reagan's "shining city on the hill." It is that urge for simpler times and a simpler society. Mary Kaldor in *New and Old Wars* (1999) discusses the notion that looking backward is the alternative when looking forward is troublesome and hopeless.

Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) contends that there are at least two types of nostalgia. The first type she describes as restorative nostalgia and the second type is reflective nostalgia (Boym, 2001). These two types of nostalgia are evident during this conservative restoration. A typology of restorative and reflective nostalgia is helpful. Restorative nostalgia has three major characteristics. First, restorative nostalgia does not consider itself to be nostalgia. It considers itself to be truth and tradition and consequently it serves to protect the absolute truth. In the conservative restoration we witness this restorative nature as the basis for policy manifests the notion that the truths of times past have been corrupted and the goal is to return those "real" truths to a place of prominence. The compassionate conservative agenda links as casual the problems in our country with the collapse of morality and Western cultural values so there is a desire for a nostalgic re-turn to the truth. This is reflected later in *ressentiment* there is perpetual accusation of the other who is/are responsible for this moral collapse. William Bennett, a spokesperson for conservatism, of the compassionate variety, stated.

I have come to the conclusion that the issues surrounding the culture and our values are the important ones...they are at the heart of the knottiest problems of public policy, whether the subject be education, art, race relations, drugs, crime, or raising children (Bennett, 1992, p. 36).

Conceptualizations of Ralph Reed former Christian Coalition Leader and current head of the Georgia Republican Party reinforce this. The religious right has the notion that we must return to the traditional Truth and that education plays a key role in this return.

Believing in the overriding importance of Christian morality and culture for solving problems and maintaining democracy, the religious right supports school prayer, school choice, abolition of secular humanism, in public schools, censorship of textbooks and books in school libraries, restricting sex education to teaching abstinence, and stopping the spread of multiculturalism (Spring, 1997, p. 6).

Protecting the absolute truth is a nostalgic movement consistently addressed by passionate conservatism and the President. In a speech delivered on October 10, 2002 at White House Conference on Faith-Based and Community Initiatives by Secretary of Education, Roderick Paige, the secretary makes the connection among truth, morality and nostalgia as truth. Speaking of President Bush, Paige stated:

He grew up in church, but like most of us, he didn't always walk the walk. Many years ago, at a particularly low point in his life, he realized that something was missing. Fortunately for him, he bumped into the Reverend Billy Graham. And they had a long, long, long conversation. And he made a decision coming out of that conversation that changed his life. And he believes that if it can change his life, that it can change the lives of others as well. And that's why he's so committed to this (Paige, 2002).

Second, nostalgia's plot is the return to origins. The plot of the new educational reform is to return to the "origins" of education before it was corrupted by the 1960s and early 1970s which the conservative restoration clearly view as something that must be overcome, forgotten and rewritten. Myron Magnet editor of the ultraconservative Manhattan Institute's *City Journal* and a former member of the editorial board of *Fortune* magazine argues that during that period American values deteriorated as a result of a cultural revolution led by "by an elite of opinion-makers, policymakers, and mythmakers—lawyers, judges, professors, political staffers, journalists, writers, TV and movie honchos, clergymen and it was overwhelmingly a liberal left-of-center elite" (Magnet, 2000, p. 20). Of course this led to a host of movements that were left-wing including the War on Poverty, court-ordered busing, affirmative action, drug treatment programs, and the political correctness movement at colleges (see Spring, 2002, pp. 1-25). Magnet in nostalgic fashion advocates a return to the values of individualism, hard work, and a belief that success is a sign of God's favor. Couple these with the religious right's notions that the expulsion of God from the classroom, the rise of the drug culture, the "sexual revolution" and multiculturalism are

unmistakable symptoms of cultural decadence and national decline" (Spring, 2002, p. 5) and the call for a return to our origins is clear. There is almost a crusade-like fervor to save the schools and Western culture from this detour into decadence. In fact, it has become one of the major political focuses of compassionate conservatism.

Third, there is always a conspiracy. Conspiracy is always used in the pejorative sense to designate a "subversive kinship of others, an imagined community based on exclusion more than affection, a union of those who are not with us but against us" (Boym, 2001, 43). That detour into the decadence produced by the 1960s and early 1970s is clearly the other -the conspiracy. Those who cling to those notions, which are primarily responsible for the moral and spiritual dilemma that we find ourselves in, are the other who are against the Truth. This notion of conspiracy in nostalgia is closely connected to the reaction of *ressentiment*, which is discussed below.

Reflective nostalgia on the other hand, "is more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude" (Boym, 2001, 49). Reflective nostalgia also has three major characteristics. First, it is focused on individual stories that savor details and signs. Second, reflective nostalgia "cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space (Boym, 2001, 49). Third, while "restorative nostalgia takes itself dead seriously, reflective nostalgia can be ironic and humorous" (Boym, 2001, 49). One further aspect of this reflective nostalgia is about a rendezvous with oneself. And, reflective nostalgia is not exclusively a private affair. "Voluntary and involuntary recollections of an individual intertwine with collective memories. In many cases the mirror of reflective nostalgia is shattered by experiences of collective devastation" (Boym, 2001, 50). There is also a sense of awareness in reflective nostalgia.

Nostalgics of the second type are aware of the gap between identity and resemblance; the home is in ruins or on the contrary, has been renovated and gentrified beyond recognition. This defamiliarization and sense of distance drives them to tell their story, to narrate the relationship between past, present and future (Boym, 2001, 50).

The past in this way is not only that which does not exist anymore but "might act and will act by inserting itself into a present sensation from which it borrows the vitality" (Bergson, 1996, 35). Deleuze (1991) discusses Bergson's metaphor of the cone, which represents the totality of virtual pasts that spring from a moment in the present.

The idea of contemporaneity of the present and the past has one final consequence: Not only does the past co-exist with the present that has been, but, as it preserves itself in itself (while the present passes), it is the whole, integral past; it is *all* our past, which coexists with present.

The famous metaphor of the cone represents this complete state of coexistence. But such a state implies finally, that in the past itself there appear all kinds of levels of profundity, marking all the possible intervals in this coexistence (Deleuze, 1991, 59).

Reflective nostalgia is more about the memories and the experience of memories than it is about the actual return to a place of origin or truth. "Ulysses, for example, returns home only to look back at his journey. In the alcove of his fair queen he becomes nostalgic for his nomadic self" (Boym, 2001, p. 50). So reflective nostalgia plays a role as well in the conservative restoration. We can fill pages with memories of the way schools used to be. Hence, in a larger framework, reflective nostalgia explains the popularity of stories of that greatest generation. And how there are interconnections between those moments of nostalgic reflection.

And what is the problem with a little nostalgia? The major concern is that as long as we are looking backward whether restoratively or reflectively in the manner described, then the new is incapable of emerging. Nostalgia is looking backward, the past in the present, rather than looking ahead or it is looking ahead and seeing the uncertainty then looking back instead. Nostalgia, which characterizes the conservative restoration is interconnected in many ways to notions of *ressentiment*.

Ressentiment

Ressentiment is a state of repressed feeling and desire, which becomes generative of values. The condition of *ressentiment* is complex both in its internal structure and in its relations to various dimensions of human existence. While it infects the heart of the individual, it is rooted in our relatedness with others. On the one hand, *ressentiment* is a dark, personal secret, which most of us would never reveal to others even if we could acknowledge it ourselves. On the other hand, *ressentiment* has an undeniably public face. It can be creative of social practices, mores, and fashions; of scholarly attitudes, academic policies, and educational initiatives; of political ideologies, institutions, and revolutions; of forms of religiosity and ascetic practices. The concept of *ressentiment* was first developed systematically by Nietzsche in his account of the historical emergence of what he terms 'slave morality' and in his critique of the ascetic ideal. This need to direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself—is the essence of *ressentiment*. While references to this condition can be found throughout his works, the chief sections in which he develops this notion are in his early work *The Genealogy of Morals*.

This need to direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself—is the essence of *ressentiment*: in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, psychologically speaking,

external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction (Nietzsche, 1989, p.37).

During this conservative restoration at a time when politicians, journalists, church dignitaries and media broadcasters are casting around desperately for objects on which to pin the blame for the “crisis in education” rather than having the courage to risk their own power by addressing the deep causes, not the manifest symptoms, of the phenomena: through training (i.e. standardized education) obedience is secured to powerful fictions of inequality, “solid” education by means of displacement, mystification, and selective forms of gratification (good test scores).

The discussion of *ressentiment* turns on what Nietzsche referred to as that delayed, considered and deliberately planned action of revenge; above all, it is what Deleuze described as the situation in which, '*reaction ceases to be acted in order to become something felt (senti)*' (Deleuze, p. 111; italics in original). Arguably, it has become routine behavior in a system designed to socialize people to believe in the reality of 'inequality' and consumption to imagine that superiors in society have some 'natural' superiority, and that society would be imperiled if the majority of people should ever come to believe that equality and superiority are conventional and hegemonic fictions. *Ressentiment* is a strategy of control, a tactic developed out of fear of freedom, to foster cowardice, pride and anxiety in people who will, in turn, renounce their own (unrealized/unacknowledged) power for the compensatory pleasure and reward of asserting/affirming their neighbor's, work colleague's, or even, lover's inferiority and incapacity. Thus, through jealousy, insecurity, and competition the distributory, justificatory fiction of inequality and standardized education - repeated throughout the social structure by hierarchy and models of explication - is established and socialized ('unsociably') by the endless construction of negative others (left-wing intellectuals), potentially threatening opponents (i.e., multicultural education, critical pedagogy). As Deleuze demonstrates, the negative dialectic is the ideology of *ressentiment*.

In conditions of structured inequality, then, instability, possible loss, disadvantage and, above all, powerlessness, are generated to such an extent that the unsettled can only be restored by an act of *ressentiment* - invariably enacted in a horizontally - orientated situation, i.e. on peers, not 'superiors'.

Ressentiment and the play of forces it produces is, therefore, part of a continuously produced narrative of inequality and compassionate conservatism - it is one of its principal resources: a seemingly equalizing action. It is the predicate of the duel, not the reflex punch. Nietzsche considers it a strategy of the 'weak', of the 'slave', ignoring that it is an effect of, not a cause of, enslavement. *Ressentiment* is an imaginary, or symbolic (even if realized) revenge on the conditions, which generated it as a value, but with a real

consequence at the horizontal level. Only rarely (e.g. the Spartacus revolt) do slaves take revenge on the real objects of their unequal condition.

In Deleuze's analysis of *ressentiment*, the 'noble' morality creatively denies difference and otherness, its view is directed back to itself; the 'slave' morality directs its view outward, affirming difference and otherness as hostile, self-threatening. It is derived from an ideological, cultural narrative. A graduated society curbs liberty by making spaces for the conditions of violence by infantilizing and, even, 'maddening, people: consuming them so that all their energies are engaged in a form of paranoia, with its psychical damage. Nietzsche, to be precise, does not confine his analysis of 'noble' and 'slave' simply to social rank, but also to what he calls 'spiritual' nature where these opposed values confront each other in the trajectory of a single life. Nietzsche and Deleuze's "man" of *ressentiment*

Posits himself through a double negation (projecting a fictional image of what he is not to which he opposes himself in order to establish what he is) and is invaded by mnemonic traces just as the masculine subject posits himself in opposition to a feminine other and is entombed in body no longer able to respond to the present (Lorraine, 1999).

Deleuze interpreting Nietzsche's conceptualization of *ressentiment* discusses three characteristics. First, there is the inability to admire, respect or love. Second, there is passivity. Third, there is the imputation of wrongs, the distribution of responsibilities and perpetual accusation. (Deleuze, 1983). After an initial discussion of *ressentiment*, these three characteristics will be discussed in relationship to the current political and educational milieu.

Ressentiment is not constituted by re-action. *Ressentiment* designates a type in which "reactive forces prevail over active forces" (Deleuze, 1983, p. 111). It is the case in which these forces can only prevail in one way: by not acting. It is not to re-act. It is reaction. "Reaction ceases to be acted in order to become something felt" (Deleuze, 1983, p. 111). Since it not about re-acting, reaction can be endless. Again, it is felt instead of being acted. "This reaction therefore blames its object, whatever it is, as an object on which revenge must be taken, which must be made to pay for this indefinite delay" (Deleuze, 1983, p.115). The object in this case is the other. The other is a critical education rather than a standardized education of consumption. There must be the distinction made and remade between the two, between a standards-based education and critical education (i.e., a "standard less education"). Continually defining, elaborating, and critiquing continuously, and endlessly, without acting define this current educational phenomenon. I want to suggest that in proposing that the call for no child left behind is intertwined with *ressentiment* is not to engage in contentious and ad hominem debate. It is an attempt at understanding how reaction operates. I am suggesting it operates within *ressentiment*.

One way that this operates is through the inability to admire or respect. According to the conservative educationist (Bennet, Ravich, Bush and others) pre-standards education has brought nothing but chaos, confusion, disarray, crisis, ideology, and repudiation of history, contentiousness, and on and on. Of course, in resentment, there must be someone or something to blame. The critique "must recriminate and distribute blame: look for the inclination to play down causes, to make misfortune someone's fault" (Deleuze, 1983, p.117). Someone must be to blame for the uncertainty and complexity in education. Rather than admiring creativity and invention or respecting multiplicity as a hopeful phenomenon, there is an inability to view it that way. It must be disparaged. It must be bounded. It must be clearly defined continually. It must be standardized.

What is most striking in the man [politics of] *ressentiment* is not his nastiness but his disgusting malevolence, his capacity for disparagement. Nothing can resist it. He does not respect his friends or even his enemies (Deleuze, 1983, p. 117).

Passivity is another characteristic of *ressentiment*.

Moreover, *ressentiment* could only be imposed on the world through the triumph of the principle of gain, by making profit not only a desire and a way of thinking but an economic, social and theological system, a complete system, a divine mechanism (Deleuze, 1983, p. 118).

This seems to be clearly indicated in the continual replay of the call to standards and accountability and the call for a profitable education. President George W. Bush makes this clear in a speech he delivered on October 17, 2002 at the Read-Patillo Elementary School.

One of the key components to successful schools is the willingness of people to use an accountability system to reinforce the positive and to address failure before it becomes acute, and that's essential. By all of these standards, this school we're standing in is a highly effective, successful school. It is a school, which, innovates, it uses computer programs to stimulate the students' imagination. It teaches phonics and grammar, the basics. It starts with the basics. It gives students incentives (Bush, 2002).

It appears that other forms of education are synonymous with permissiveness, chaos and poor test scores, and unprofitability. Passive doesn't mean non-active, it means "non-acted" (Nietzsche, 1987). "The term "passive" stands for the triumph of reaction, the moment when, ceasing to be acted, it becomes *ressentiment*" (Deleuze, 1983, p. 118).

Perpetual accusation, distribution of responsibilities and imputation of wrongs is a third characteristic of *ressentiment*. Here is the dangerous side of this phenomenon, “it is not content to denounce crimes and criminals, it wants sinners, people who are responsible” (Deleuze, 1983, p.119). Responsibility in this case for what? There must be villains (others) who can be responsible and can be perpetually accused of (blamed for) sending the education into this “so-called” perpetual crisis. Just as a conservative political agenda needs an enemy, an evil empire, or a mad monarch—a Saddam, an educational reform toward accountability needs an evil to combat. And, by distinguishing that which is other as evil, one confirms the goodness of the reform. It is through defining the other that we are, indeed, defined. Although these authors would never use the term evil, the logic is implicit. Education prior to standardization is evil therefore the standards and testing are good, that is *ressentiment*.

The lamb says: I could do everything the eagle does; I’m admirable for not doing so. Let the eagle do as I do (Deleuze, 2001, p. 78).

The compassionate conservative *politics of ressentiment* is directly tied to educational policy in the form of standards, testing and accountability. It is a way of reacting to the uncertainty of the post 9/11 global phenomena, without acting upon the concrete issues that trouble our educational system, our society and our world. It looks nostalgically backwards to a day when education was socially efficient and children behaved themselves and did what they were told. Did they ever? It is a politics that views attempts to be creative and critical as threats and treats those attempts as evil. It is an anti-intellectual position. An education, which maintains passivity and consumption, is the past in the present. It is an education of fragmentation and little hope.

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