

Resentment and the Inversion of Values in Trump's America

Joanne Ciulla

Rutgers Business School-Netward and New Brunswick

Over the years, leadership scholars have devised glowing models of transformational, transforming, and servant leadership. These ideal leaders were ethical, inspirational, visionary and responsible – albeit, often paternalistic. They aren't necessarily democratic models of leadership because, except for transforming leadership, the research behind them is based on business organizations, which are usually more like dictatorships or oligarchies. More recently, many leadership scholars have rejected ideas of the lone, heroic, and usually male leader. They have embraced more egalitarian and democratic models of shared or collaborative leadership that is practiced by the full variety of people and peoples who comprise the human race. This too is very nice indeed. And then, along came Donald Trump, a leader who forces us to confront the distance between what actual leaders are and what leadership scholars think they ought to be.

Understanding what made a president like Trump possible will occupy scholars of all stripes for years to come. From the perspective of ethics, he is one of the most openly unethical presidents in American history. Yet, most of his followers do not seem to care – he almost could get away with shooting someone in the middle of 5th Avenue. How does that fact square with the assumption that people want ethical leaders who are good role models? One of the most difficult aspects of analyzing Trump's leadership and his influence on supporters is that he has no regard for the truth – and when truth goes on holiday, it usually packs logic in its suitcase. Hence, the usual forms of reasoned analysis seem to fall short. To understand why followers would support a leader who is not only personally unethical but who takes actions that are often against their own interests and values, requires an understanding of emotion, not reason.

In this paper, I begin by examining the emotion of resentment or to be more accurate, the French concept of *ressentiment*. As a mass emotion, *ressentiment* is not new. At the turn of the century, Max Scheler and Friedrich Nietzsche diagnosed *ressentiment* as a social and moral malaise of modernity. Nietzsche (never one to worry about insulting people) called it “the revolt of the slaves” that leads to a reign of mediocrity, corruption, and political nihilism. Scheler described it as a reliving of negative emotions, impotence, and weakness. In her seminal book *Leadership by Resentment*, political philosopher Ruth Capriles describes resentment as a grievance that is so old we have forgotten who it is against. Resentment is a long-term emotion that stems from social comparison. Moreover, resentment breeds resentment. This emotion afflicts people on both sides of the political spectrum in America today.

This paper focuses on the most harmful social and moral aspects of resentment, which is what Nietzsche calls the “inversion of values.” The inversion of values occurs when people come to regard what was considered good as not good, and vice versa. This aspect of resentment explains why Trump supporters do not object to his unethical personal behavior or policies that harm democracy and the many and benefit the few. It also explains why some of those who are appalled by Trump's unethical behavior don't seem to be able to do much about it because

they too feel or are impotent. Many of Trump's supporters and detractors would rather see their enemy harmed than see their country healed. The power that resentment channels into leaders stems from the self-destructive and counter-productive behavior of followers. Leaders like Trump do not need to win their loyalty by what they create because they can get it from what they destroy, and it is easier to knock things down than it is to build them. Destruction of what those they resent hold dear feeds the insatiable hunger of resentment. By examining resentment and the inversion of values, this paper aims to help us think about what leaders can do to diminish or eliminate this personal, moral, and socially destructive emotion.