


The case for rage: Why anger is essential to anti-racist struggle

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The central aim of Myisha Cherry's book is stated in the title: *The case for rage: Why anger is essential to anti-racist struggle*. She takes on arguments against anger—from ancient to recent—while characterizing types of anger that she argues actually deserve that negative reputation. But the bulk of this insightful, useful, important, and, yes, angry, book is devoted to building on the germinal work on anger by the Black Lesbian poet, essayist, and theorist Audre Lorde, to describe, analyze, and advocate for what Cherry calls “Lordean rage,” a form of anger directed against racism in all its manifestations. The book exemplifies the virtues of grounded philosophy, both in its moral phenomenology and in its commitment to anti-racist struggle. Such attention to descriptive detail and to concrete forms of action guides the focus on the United States; but, as is often the case, such specificity makes the analysis more rather than less useful for those in other locations than would be a more universalized and abstracted approach, and there will certainly be much here that will be illuminating for those who take it up from sites of decolonizing activism or from within diverse metropolises.

To clear the ground for her defense of the appropriateness and political necessity of Lordean rage, Cherry characterizes several varieties of anger, specifically in the context of racial injustice, all but one of which actually deserve the opprobrium directed toward anger in all its forms. Her typology focuses on the anger's target (at whom or what), its aim and action tendency (what it hopes to achieve and how), and its perspective (the attitudes from which it arises.) (p. 14) Briefly: (1) Rogue rage is indiscriminately targeted, hitting back at the world, from a hopeless, nihilistic perspective; (2) Wipe rage targets scapegoats—hated racialized “others”—and aims at elimination, from a perspective that views the world as a zero-sum game; (3) Ressentiment rage targets those in power, reactively aiming at revenge, from the perspective that holds the oppressor as the obsessive object of attention and measure of worth; and (4) Narcissistic rage (a term coined by bell hooks) is experienced by those who take themselves to be exceptional and to be unjustly discriminated against as individuals, and it aims at buttressing their own sense of their proper place in a hierarchy. By contrast, (5) Lordean rage targets “those who are complicit in and perpetrators of racism and racial injustice,” whether powerful and distant or close by and professing solidarity; its aim is change “in racist beliefs, expectations, policies, and behaviors that shape and support white supremacy. It motivates action to bring about such change, and it is informed by an inclusive perspective: in Lorde's terms: “I am not free while any [other] is unfree” (p. 24).

In contrast to Martha Nussbaum's call for anger to be merely transitional—giving way to generosity and love¹—Lordean rage is *transformative*. Interestingly, Cherry refers to it as “metabolized,” a term defined by the Buddhist

scholar Emily McRae as “the virtuous channeling of the power and energy of anger without the desire to harm or pass pain” (p. 24).² Antiracist activism *feeds on* Lordean rage, requiring a metabolic process that keeps it focused, thoughtful, and effective. This discussion can be seen as a response to the concern that Buddhist metabolization of anger is available only to those who can master demanding meditative practices: on Cherry’s account, the discipline of metabolization is both collective and (thus) also accessible. As she puts it, “[t]he aim of Lordean rage is to bring about change—to create a world in which racial injustice is no more. Its action tendency is to metabolize it—that is, to make it useful for certain ends” (p. 71)—a just world in which no-one is oppressed. Inclusiveness, “a lust for peace and equality,” rather than a desire for revenge, is intrinsic to Lordean rage. It is not that anger at racism needs to be tamed by something else that dampens its destructive fury: rather, the anger itself is entangled with love and compassion even toward those whose actions and attitudes make them the appropriate targets of the anger. Furthermore, she argues that anger has “an approach action tendency” (p. 25), unlike hate or contempt, both of which aim at the destruction, banishing, or at least distancing from the other: anger holds the other in one’s judgmental gaze, demanding accountability, acknowledgment, and sincere efforts at repair. Much of the rest of the book takes up the question of how to understand this process of metabolization and, crucially, how diversely placed people can best support it in themselves and each other.

Cherry’s clarity about the obstacles to achieving such a world combined with her commitment to working toward it reminds me of Gramsci’s call for “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” The epistemic aspect of anger is important to Cherry: it counters the ignorance at the heart of white supremacist hegemony, ignorance especially on the part of white people, but also deeply “baked into the status quo” (p. 94) including in what Cherry names and theorizes as socially enforced “racial rules” that prescribe and proscribe not only actions but also thoughts and feelings. Anger itself, she argues, not just the dissident actions it might fuel, is a form of resistance, shedding light on what is meant to go unnoticed and violating the rules about how one is supposed to feel, as well as how one is supposed to perceive, think, and act. The two sets of rules that Cherry focuses on are “Remember whiteness and keep it holy” and “Thou shalt not have a right to white male anger.”

The first set of rules undergirds presumptions of white entitlement to land and “natural resources” as well as to the bodies and labor of others³: a cognitive rule that exalts the contributions and capacities of white people and downgrades or ignores those of others; a behavioral rule that proscribes challenging that entitlement; and a feeling rule that proscribes antiracist anger and prescribes for Black people ungrounded hope and diminished expectations, as well as the enforced expectation that they will immediately and unconditionally forgive white people who commit violence against them. In explaining the second set of rules, Cherry draws on feminist analyses of the gendered aspects of emotions, adding a specifically racialized dimension that makes anger appropriate—even “righteous”—for white people, as a mechanism of control and as an expression of their entitlement to respect and deference, while nonwhites do not matter enough to be rightfully offended when they are mistreated. While antiracist anger is short-circuited by “Who are you to be judging me?” and “What do you have to be angry at?”, Lordean rage is a form of reparative rewiring that *in itself* “reveals racial logics, blocks white supremacist plans, resists claims of superiority, grants respect to all persons, affirms the value of racialized groups, and disrupts racial domination by any means necessary” (p. 117). In making a case for anger itself as a form of resistance, Cherry does not mean to downplay the importance of activism, but not just for what it can accomplish in the world—it also helps to make it possible to live well with anger.

Making the case for the appropriateness and value of anger leaves the question, which Cherry takes seriously, of what sorts of actions in response to Lordean rage are appropriate, wise, prudent, and moral. Even Lordean rage can go wrong; and it is crucial to the project of the book to examine how and why it does and what we—collectively and differently located—can do to avoid or deal with that. Before going on to articulate strategies for addressing these questions generally, Cherry specifically speaks about and to white people who would be “allies” in antiracist struggle. The scare quotes mark the complexities around allyship, complexities Cherry sensitively discusses, opting finally for the term “rage renegades” to describe white people in solidarity—including emotional solidarity—with Black people and others targeted by racism. White people (like me) can, that is, experience and act on Lordean rage,

though, as she persuasively argues, we commit a metaphysical, epistemic, and moral mistake if we move from our anger at racial oppression to overlooking, denying, or minimizing what we do not experience, cannot fully understand, and do not have the right to claim. These missteps are framed by, enabled by, and reinforce white supremacy, in ways Cherry enumerates and illustrates. In particular, white people can take their own anger to matter more than the anger of those who are racially oppressed; can appropriate, rather than amplifying, the anger of the oppressed; can performatively grandstand their own individual antiracist virtue; and can participate in white saviorism, downplaying the agency of the racially oppressed. All these examples rang—often uncomfortably—true to me, including as I've long reflected on the complex relationships between Black and (white) Jewish Americans. Cherry's discussion is often pointed—angry—but, as an expression of Lordean anger, it is addressed to those she wants to include, whose solidarity she welcomes: it is a critical drawing in, not a pushing out.

The chapter on rage renegades helped me think about my initial puzzlement about Cherry's decision to use "rage" both in her title and in her theorizing. She explains her choice briefly as guided by the embracing of "Black rage" by race scholars such as bell hooks and Cornel West, as well as the use of "rage" by feminist scholars such as Soraya Chemaly and Brittney Cooper to describe women's anti-patriarchal anger. For these theorists, as for Cherry, "rage" names "an intense anger in response to incessant injustice" (p. 16), and she uses it as a synonym for anger. While she notes that she does not have in mind the pejorative connotations of "rage," as "irrational, uncontrolled, and dangerous," it is also important for her, in taxonomizing anger, not to attend especially to intensity or proportionality, another vector that might be thought to mark rage as distinctive. Those concerned with moderating and taming anger often speak about the need for it to be measured, "proportionate" to what it is directed against; and rage is often thought of as problematic for being disproportionate—not just out of control, but outsized. This charge can often, Cherry notes, be levied against those who seem excessively angry—enraged—at some small slight. But since such slights are both cumulative and systematic, so, appropriately, is the rage they evoke. Lordean rage, while often immediately addressed to specific acts and actors, has as its root target the systemic racism of which specific, perhaps superficially insignificant, occurrences are both symptomatic and constitutive. In addition, when it comes to racism, especially focusing on the lived experience of Black people, it is hard to argue that its historical and present-day manifestations call for anger that is moderate and measured.

But thinking about Cherry's admonitions to rage renegade leads me, as someone in that category, to question the use of "rage" to characterize my anger at racial injustice. My inclination is to stick with anger—emphasizing the element of judgment, not as against intensity of feeling, but rather as marking the less visceral, less immediately experiential relationship I, as a white person, have to racism. I want, that is, to respect the Blackness of Black rage, the importance of the experiences that, as Cherry points out, I have not had and cannot fully fathom. But I need to be careful here: I am treading very close to claiming to be more rational, more polite, less confrontational, hence more reliable as a testifier to racism than are those expressing rage—which is, of course, to exhibit one of the faults Cherry correctly charges white would-be allies with enacting. The problem is more than abstractly theoretical: while privilege can—and too often does—lead to entitled, obnoxious arrogance, it can also—as in my case—lead to temperamentally easy-going niceness, a trait that can make it easier (especially for more powerful people) to get along with me than with those who have what is derisively referred to as "a chip on their shoulder," but which is better understood as a boulder on their back. Cherry's analysis exacerbates this tension by making it clear that white privilege leads to phenomenological and epistemic limitations (distancing racism from my immediate experience and hence tempering my emotional responses to it), but that it is precisely those limitations that lead to white-supremacy reinforcing benefits, even (or especially) when I use those benefits in ways meant to be an expression of solidarity. This exacerbation is not a fault of her analysis: it is, rather, revelatory of a very real tension that rage (or anger) renegades need to learn to navigate responsibly.

Toward the end of the book, Cherry turns to providing a view of anger management that is meant not to moderate or eliminate anger, but rather to enable us to "work through it, harness it, and use it to achieve positive ends" (p. 139). This approach, she argues, is at odds with what has been taught from the ancients to present-day popular culture, which focuses on moderation and proportionality, which, as noted above, are not useful criteria for Lordean

rage, management of which aims rather at “appropriateness, motivation, productivity, [and] resistance” (p. 143). To these ends, she offers four techniques: expression, solidarity, goals and plans, and resistance. Her discussion of these techniques is detailed and concrete, addressing in each case each of anger's aims, illustrating the techniques' usefulness equally for effective activism and for emotional self-care, for living well as an angry person. The final technique—resistance—is needed in the face of those who would attempt to silence rage by policing or dismissing it. The policing of rage attempts to enforce standards of “quietness, civility, comfort, or respectability” (p. 159), and my concerns above about my own comfortably privileged temperament can be understood as my being drafted by the anger police as the exemplary respectable angry person, even as I attempt to deflect attention toward the rageful Black activists and theorists I have learned from.

The book's theoretical analysis is helpfully illuminated throughout by examples from real life and popular culture that will likely resonate especially with American readers but are fully and thoughtfully enough described for readers who might not already be familiar with them. It is one of Cherry's great strengths as a philosopher that she is a storyteller, and her astute theorizing is grounded in and nourished by narrative soil. Unlike the abstracted and artificial examples common in analytic philosophy, these narratives are emotionally engaging in ways that put flesh on the bones of the arguments. This feature of Cherry's writing exemplifies one of the central claims of the book: emotions matter, not least because when they transgress oppressive rules and attune us to injustice, they help us perceive oppressive features of the world whose normative invisibility helps to keep them in place. And just as the detailed particularity of her examples makes her arguments more rather than less meaningful to others differently located, the specific political focus and aim of the book makes it an especially meaningful contribution to a number of different fields, including political theory, moral psychology, and the (relational) ontology of emotions.⁴ It is by seeing the problems in those fields worked out in situ (as Wittgenstein would say, on “the rough ground”) that they come alive, that we see the stakes we (various ones of us) have in how they are answered. The book has a striking cover, a helpful index, and a wonderful, lengthy bibliography; and Oxford University Press is to be praised for its very reasonable price, as well for as the significant role the Press is playing as a venue for usable, transformative philosophy.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ See Martha Nussbaum, “From Anger to Love: Self-Purification and Political Resistance.” In *To Shape a New World: Essays on the Political Philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Brandon M. Terry and Tommie Shelby (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).
- ² The reference to McCrae comes from a chapter in *The Moral Psychology of Anger*, edited by Cherry and Owen Flanagan. Thanks to Karsten Struhl for drawing my attention to and helping me understand the Buddhist resonances in Cherry's discussion of the metabolization of anger.
- ³ As Cherry acknowledges, this entitlement is at the heart of colonization as well as continuing neocolonialism, making this discussion an especially fruitful point of entry for those whose relationship to racism is different from that of Black Americans.
- ⁴ Ami Harbin's 2023 book, *Fearing Together: Ethics for Insecurity*, also with Oxford University Press, sees fear—like anger—as ontologically relational and as politically inflected.