

# The Aptness of Anger: Amia Srinivasan Interviewed by Stephen Law

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## Abstract

Amia Srinivasan is interviewed about her classic paper ‘The Aptness of Anger’, which challenges a common response to those who express anger at injustice: that their anger is counterproductive.

In a famous exchange at the Cambridge Union in 1965 James Baldwin, a leading American Civil Rights activist, and William F. Buckley, a leading conservative, debated the motion ‘The American Dream has been achieved at the expense of the American negro’. Buckley, while claiming to agree with Baldwin that terrible injustices had been perpetrated against black Americans, said that Baldwin and other black Americans should now be pragmatic, focusing on what might now be done, looking forward, to improve their situation, rather than continuing to hark back angrily to those past injustices. Buckley warned Baldwin that such anger would be counterproductive, and likely to result in confrontation and violence. Black people, he argued, ought to be cool-headed and practical.

Amia Srinivasan’s paper ‘The Aptness of Anger’ offers a response to Buckley and those who argue that, when it comes to campaigning for civil rights and social justice, those on the receiving end of injustice ought always to avoid anger. Srinivasan argues that such anger, even if counterproductive, can still be apt.

**S.L. Buckley may have meant to be helpful to Baldwin. He was perhaps well-meaning, genuinely wanting to help Baldwin achieve his**

**goals. But then, some might say, Buckley did nothing wrong and does not deserve to be criticized for telling Baldwin that he ought not to get angry. Is this a good defence of Buckley?**

A.S. First off, I really recommend that readers watch the debate – it’s available on YouTube (search ‘James Baldwin vs Williams F Buckley Jr Cambridge Union’). It is a riveting exchange between two exceptionally powerful speakers. And you can see from the Cambridge students’ faces just how rapt they are, and for good reason.

When you watch the debate it’s evident that Buckley wasn’t really trying to offer helpful advice to Baldwin; he is being high-handed and snide. At one point he voices his resentment at Baldwin’s literary fame, and ultimately he threatens Baldwin and all proponents of Civil Rights with violent war. (Buckley says: ‘If it does finally come to a confrontation, a radical confrontation ... then we will fight the issue, not only in the Cambridge Union, but we will fight it ... on beaches and on hills and on mountains and on landing grounds.’)

All this fits in with Buckley’s overall politics, which was extremely right-wing. Buckley opposed Civil Rights legislation and defended racial segregation in the US South – saying,



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for example, that Southern whites were ‘the advanced race’ and that this justified Southern Blacks being excluded from voting. He also defended apartheid in South Africa. Buckley was in absolutely no way interested in giving Baldwin ‘useful advice’ for achieving his goals of racial justice; instead, Buckley was a fierce opponent of racial justice.

What’s so interesting, as you suggest, is that Buckley chooses to *present* himself as someone who is just giving ‘pragmatic advice’ to Baldwin

and other justifiably angry Black people like him. This is a rhetorical move, one that gives Buckley plausible deniability: he can claim not to be opposing racial justice, but rather just suggesting something that is in the best interest of Black people. But, in fact, what Buckley knows, as a conservative opponent of Civil Rights, is that the anger of Black Americans – an anger that was at that very moment being channelled and mobilised into collective political struggle – was absolutely crucial for their pursuit of racial

justice. Buckley was trying to portray Black people's anger as 'counterproductive' precisely because he knew how politically productive it in fact was.

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That said, there *are* cases in which getting angry can be counterproductive, either for oneself personally, or for a group's political aims. This is especially true at the individual level. Sometimes, one can get justifiably angry – what I call 'aptly angry' – at a real moral violation or injustice, and yet that anger can result in more harm against oneself or one's family or community. In those cases, a totally well-intentioned person might give you the 'useful advice' not to get angry.

For example, imagine you are a Palestinian student studying in the US on a visa. In the US now, foreign students are being detained and threatened with deportation simply for speaking out against Israel's genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. Your American friend might, out of a genuine concern for your safety, tell you not to get angry, at least in front of anyone who might report you, about either the war in Gaza or the authoritarian actions of Donald Trump's government. This advice may be well-intentioned and pragmatic, but it is also part of the injustice you face. It's not just an unfortunate fact about the world that anger about Gaza can result in grievous harm; rather, it's a feature of a deliberate and unjust politics. Put another way, Palestinians are punished twice over: first, for the mere fact of existing as people with legitimate claims to live on equal terms in the land of historic Palestine; and second, for getting angry about their unjust treatment.

**S.L. In the paper, you introduce the idea of affective injustice. What is affective injustice?**

A.S. 'Affective injustice' is the sort of injustice one experiences when one faces a choice between getting aptly angry at some injustice or wrong, and acting in one's own prudential interest. The case above is an example: if you are a foreign student in the US, forced to choose between getting aptly angry at Israel's genocide and making sure you don't get detained and deported, this is an instance of affective injustice. You are structurally coerced into suppressing a fitting response to a genuine moral outrage. Affective injustice, I write in the paper, is 'the injustice of having to negotiate between one's apt emotional response to the injustice of one's situation and one's desire to better one's situation'.

Affective injustice is also present in the way, in general, that marginalized groups are policed in their emotional expressions. Women who express anger are often labelled hysterical; Black and brown people who get angry are seen as aggressive and threatening. Presumed here is that the anger of certain people is a result of their deficient – hysterical, aggressive, etc. – characters, rather than a fitting response to social and political reality.

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S.L. In your paper, you consider a defence of Buckley: that what he really meant is not that Baldwin should not *be* angry, but merely that Baldwin should not *act* angrily, Baldwin should not allow his anger to become visible. It’s only that behaviour that Buckley is warning against. But then Buckley can agree with you that Baldwin’s *feeling* of anger is apt and blameless and can also insist there is nothing wrong with Buckley telling Baldwin he ought only to avoid *showing* his anger. How do you respond to this defence?

A.S. Again, I think this would be an overly charitable reading of the actual, historical William F. Buckley, Jr. He didn’t want Baldwin or other Black people to even feel angry – he thought they had nothing to be angry about! But let’s imagine a Buckley or another critic of anger who really does want to distinguish between justifiably *feeling* angry and counterproductive *expressions* of anger. Such a person says, for example, to our imaginary Palestinian student that she can *feel* angry, just not *act* angry – cannot, for example, raise her voice, verbally criticize Israel, argue against Trump’s policies, join a protest, and so on.

This response relies on what I call in the paper a ‘pure disjunctivist’ account of emotions – one that sees emotions as entirely separable from their stereotypical expression or outward

manifestation. But this is an implausible way to think about anger or any other affective state. Anger is not a belief about the world (‘this is wrong’) but an embodied, expressive state. Indeed, anger, along with other of what psychologists call ‘basic emotions’, appears to possess manifestation conditions that are stable across human cultures, and shared in common with many mammals – for example, grimacing, raising your voice, staring, and so on. In other words, part of what it is to *feel* angry is to behave in an angry way.

Now, I am not saying that humans cannot undergo forms of cultural retraining that change the behavioural manifestations of anger. In non-violent political movements, for example, participants are taught how to feel angry without the stereotypical expression of that anger. They are taught how to stay outwardly calm, even if they are being physically assaulted. But this requires a lot of training and discipline, and is much easier to do in a group than as an individual. To go back to our imaginary Palestinian student, if we tell her she can feel angry but not express it, we are in effect saying: ‘Feel free to get angry! Just first re-train your emotions so that you are capable of feeling angry without ever showing it.’

S.L. Angry protests, in which the frustrations of the protestors at their failure to be heard result in traffic being stopped, works of art daubed with paint, are often accused of being counterproductive – of turning public opinion against them and their cause. Is this response to such current protests also an example of affective injustice?

A.S. Possibly. But when people say, ‘This is counterproductive’, they often mean it makes them uncomfortable. But that a political action causes discomfort does not show that it is counterproductive – on the contrary. Consider the suffragettes, the US Civil Rights movement, the women’s liberation movement, anti-colonial struggles. These movements were often condemned as alienating or counterproductive at the time, yet they were enormously *productive*. As we saw with Buckley, claims of ‘counterproductivity’ can often mask attempts simply to repress powerful political energies.

That said, there are extremely difficult strategic questions for any political movement to address, concerning which tactics do and do not actually work. For example, within the modern labour movement, there are deep disagreements about how and when to use strikes – should they be a tactic of last resort, used sparingly, or are they the primary vehicle for the exercise of worker power? The contemporary climate movement faces similar and difficult questions about which levers of power should and should not be pulled, when, and how. These questions are incredibly difficult to resolve, and cannot be resolved in the abstract. There are no universal answers to what is and isn't strategically productive – the answer depends on the specificities of political context.

**S.L. 'The Aptness of Anger' is a modern classic and widely used in university teaching. Is there anything in the paper that you have changed your mind about, or anything you would now want to add?**

A.S. I don't think there is anything I have changed my mind about, but there are some things I would now emphasize or elaborate.

The first is that apt anger is most often counterproductive in contexts where there is no organized political movement that allows for that anger to be productively channelled and mobilized. When anger is embedded within a broader movement – when it is structured, directed, and given a strategic role – it can be extraordinarily effective in producing political change. As I say in the paper, anger can be collectivized, sharpened, and used as a tool of resistance. On the flipside, when anger is not given such form, it really can be counterproductive, inviting more or deepened harm against the angry person or group.

Second and relatedly, I would now emphasize the role of political organization not just in channelling anger but in reshaping its expression. Liberation movements often involve forms of

cultural retraining that seek to discipline anger's expression – consider, for example, the intense behavioural discipline involved in Gandhian *Satyagraha*, non-violent political resistance. This retraining is not about suppressing anger, but about cultivating in people the ability to use it effectively: to distinguish between immediate catharsis and long-term change, to avoid being baited into counterproductive displays of rage, and to develop forms of solidarity that reorient anger away from scapegoats and towards the true agents of injustice. If anger is to be politically powerful, it cannot remain a purely individual or sporadic response; it must be collectivized and structured, and that process requires practical discipline. Such discipline is very hard to practise, but it is absolutely essential for any successful liberatory movement.

Third, I would want to emphasise that even though anger can be apt – a justified response to a genuine moral outrage or injustice – that certainly doesn't mean that all anger is apt. Consider, for example, the anger of Trump voters who feel that their way of life is under threat. Some of this anger is simply inapt – directed at the supposed loss of a traditional, heteronormative, racially homogeneous America to which no one is in fact entitled. But some of it is anger at genuine economic precarity, only misdirected at migrants, racial minorities and trans people, rather than at the real agents of their suffering: the capitalist oligarchs who have captured the American state for their benefit. The challenge is not simply to say 'some anger is apt, some is inapt'. It is also to think about the political conditions under which apt anger can be correctly oriented and mobilized in the service of justice rather than resentment and reaction. If anger is to be politically useful, it must be cultivated within solidaristic movements that help people understand both the true sources of their suffering and the real possibilities for change.

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