



# Hot Emotionality and the Fracture of Trust in the Era of Grievance Politics

Tereza Capelos  
University of Southampton

ENTRUST Conference – 29 September 2023

# Abstract

**Grievance politics**, imbued with hot and uneasy emotionality, dominates the emotional politics of **contemporary democracies**. Hot emotions can serve as **emotional flashpoints** signalling social, political, and economic crises and uncomfortable truths about unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, rising asset and wealth inequality, local marginalization, felt often as loss of dignity and humiliation. While grievance politics deals with what matters to us, it can turn anti-democratic when ignored, or pro-democratic when the emotional origins of its demands are addressed (Capelos et al. 2022). In this talk, we will examine the relationship between the emotional economy of grievance politics founded on resentment, and the **fracture of citizens' political trust** which compromises the perceived effectiveness of political and policy actors in delivering meaningful policies. We also **explore solutions** for pro-democratic articulations and responses to grievance politics that alleviate resentment and repair compromised trust in democratic governance.

# Challenge 1: Trust & Stability in Contemporary Democracies

- Trust promotes stability in uncertain, complex, risky environments [crises, tensions]
- Interpersonal, intergroup, and interstate level
- High price for misplaced trust or failure to trust
- Definitions:
  - **Psychological state** comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon the positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998, p. 395) [inward]
  - **Expectation** of no harm in a context where disappointment and betrayal are always a possibility (Wheeler, 2018, p. 3) [outward]

# Unlocking the Puzzles of Trust

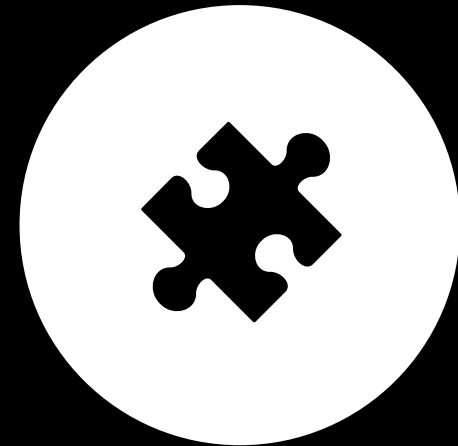
Theoretical puzzle: How is trust achieved? What is its psychological mechanism?

Provocative question: can we envision democracies without trust? [keep this for later]

Analytical Framework: Trust belief as a psychological state that manages **motive inconsistent uncertainty** [keep this for later]

→ cognitive, motivational and affective components

- ❑ Risk calculation implies **cognition**
- ❑ Goodwill, benign intent, desire for no harm and risk-taking implies **motivation**
- ❑ Reliance / reliability imply **emotions** of safety and anxiety



# Trust Belief: blended psychological state involving cognitive, motivational and affective processes

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**Cognitive:** Trust is not just risk calculation. It is a psychological strategy to manage uncertainty Damasio (1999) and is distinct from confidence / faith / hope (Luhmann, 1988). Trust is invoked when we **substitute performance related knowledge (confidence) with our relation to another person** (*affect as information* (Forgas 1991))



**Motivation:** desire to contain motive inconsistent uncertainty in the absence of information



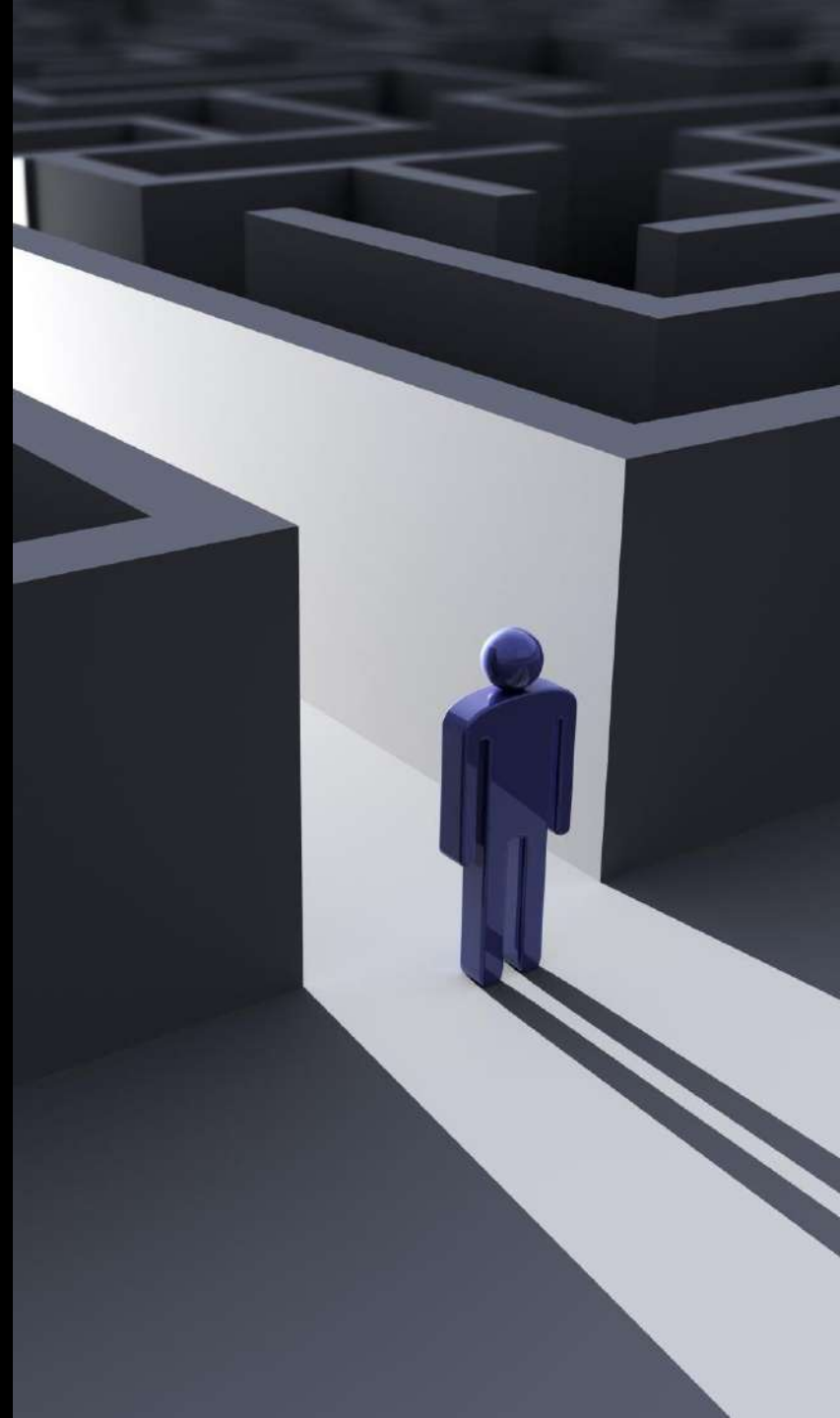
**Affective:** trust is not just anxious uncertainty or blissful certainty. It helps to see trust as defined by affective ambivalence towards the object of our uncertainty OU (contains anxiety) & the object of our trust OT (contains positive relational attachment)



# Key steps to achieving / maintaining trust belief: capacity to manage Affective Ambivalence

Trust as **psychological strategy to manage uncertainty** is demanding. It requires the ability to:

- Separate the object of uncertainty (event, crisis, individual/group that represents a political entity) from the object of trust (the other as an individual who is met as a human being).
- Separate the anxiety towards the object of uncertainty, and the safety felt towards the object of trust
- Trust is difficult to achieve in interpersonal and political interactions...





## Impossibilities / challenges of trust in the era of grievance politics

- When the anxiety towards the object of uncertainty (OU) is uncritically **projected** on to the object of trust (OT) (the other individual), there is no possibility for trust to develop: individuals misattribute anxiety
  - When OU and OT are one person (diplomat, politician), individuals do not approach the other **as a human being** but as a representative of ‘the opponent’
- When the safety / positive attachment towards the object of trust (OT) is **uncritically projected** on to the object of uncertainty (OU), the uncertainty is replaced by wishful certainty
- - Inability to appreciate risk



## Where is Trust Hiding? Latent concept

(measure as proxy, asking questions on trust => rationalizations)

**Uncertainty:** Object of Uncertainty: an uncertainty event; Degree of Uncertainty; Orientations of uncertainty

**Mention/recognition of the other as object of trust:** Positive/negative mentions (valence), emotions.

**Perception of the other's intent:** to compare OU/OT: benign / threatening

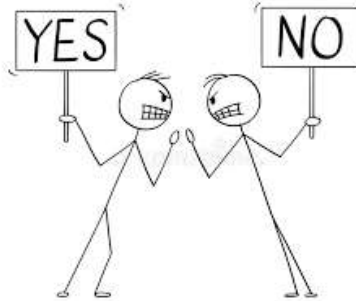
**Individual/Group[State] psychological state:** favour/inhibit pro-social outcomes

**Measured Outcomes:** constructive / destructive behaviors

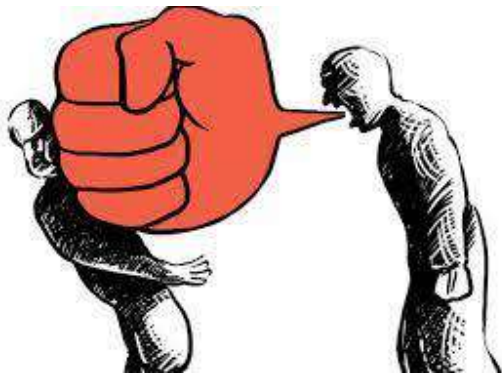




## Challenge 2: Hot Emotionality of Grievance Politics



Angry  
Uncivil  
Bitter  
Vengeful



# “Unprecedented times“ ?

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‘At a time when conservatism and radicalism are both regarded, by their respective adherents, almost as religions, and the conflict between reactionism and liberalism is sharper than at any time before within the memory of living man, no apology need be forthcoming for an attempt to arrive at a critical understanding of the psychology, and the probable ethical value, of these attitudes.’

(Wolfe, 1923, page viii)

‘Interest-conflicts are now so commonly pursued and inflamed by the passionate, praise-and-blame propagandas of sentimental, egotistical, and class-conscious reactionaries, conservatives and radicals’ (Wolfe, 1923, page ix)



## Dark Box: How Grievance Turns Sour?

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### Reversions of Democracy

- The Anti-Social Triad
  - Reactionism
  - Ressentiment
  - Collective Narcissism

Challenges, not threats

## Reactionism

'The scale of attitudes which different men and women take towards social change may be compared to the solar spectrum. At the opposite ends stand extreme radicalism and uncompromising reaction'  
Wolfe, 1923 (p.11).

# Reactionism: cluster concept

Complex political orientation of feeling overwhelmed by the present and want to return to the past (Capelos, Katsanidou, Demerzis 2017). Preference for retreat and preoccupation with what is lost.

## Conceptual complexity

- Cluster concept: System of sentiments, mental attitudes and behaviors
- Does not occupy a particular left-right ideological space
- Promotes change backward, against the new
- via mainstream participation, abstention, illegal, violent -and legal-political actions (
- Related concepts: Progressivism, Radicalism (change against the new, Conservatism (resistance to change).



## Ressentiment: Sour Grapes

'The fox who longed for  
grapes, beholds with  
pain

The tempting clusters  
were too high to gain;

Grieved in his heart he  
forced a careless smile,


And cried, 'They're  
sharp and hardly worth  
my while'

Aphra Behn, 1687

*Ressentiment:*  
the affective  
undercurrent  
of grievance  
politics

**(NOT) Resentment:** the feeling of someone who: i) judges unworthy the position that someone else has in the social hierarchy, and ii) thinks that someone else deprives him/her of chances or privileges that he himself could enjoy [anger, anxiety, efficacy]

***Ressentiment:*** chronic reliving of repressed and endless vindictiveness, hostility, envy, and indignation due to the powerlessness of the subject in expressing them, and resulting, at the level of values, in the negation of what is unconsciously desired



# Collective Narcissism as a psychological state

- ❑ Negative emotionality
- ❑ Lack of gratitude, compassion, social connectedness
- ❑ Intergroup distrust, antagonism
- ❑ Conspiratorial thinking
  
- ❑ Different from in-group satisfaction: other group stripped of its moral value

# Ressentiment in Grievance Politics

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- Grievance: Pro-social or Anti-social Outcomes
- Ressentiment: mechanism that determines its emotional undercurrent (*EmRes*)
  - Envy, Shame, Inefficacious anger => morally righteous victimhood, resentment, destiny, hatred, outgroup hostility Transvaluation of individual and collective [collective narcissism]
  - Produces Anti-Social Grievance Outcomes
  - From politics of winners/losers to the politics of resentful victimhood



## Contemporary expressions of the Triad: 'The Hidden Antisocials'

- ❑ Self-absorbed, lack of sense of identity
- ❑ Splitting: all good/all bad
- ❑ Social sharing reinforces morally righteous victimhood & shallow social bonds
- ❑ Not good/bad [normative]  
Vulnerable psychological state



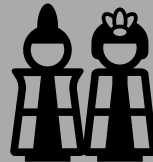
Challenge 3:  
Synthesis

Trust  
Grievance  
Ressentiment  
[and beyond?]



Trust is enhanced by Social Sharing

In *ressentiment* social sharing is based on shallow bonds



Trust of ingroup others through group identification

In *ressentiment* social sharing breeds collective narcissisms /collective victimhood



Politics => psychology: friends trust each-other, provide council and privilege to information during crises

In *ressentiment*, solidarity in times of need is not a commitment.

# Are we knocking on the wrong door? Why are we still knocking on it? Can we achieve democracy without trust?

Accept that in era of *ressentimentful* victimhood trust bonds are shallow

Invest in building confidence / competence: public narratives, political discourses, and policy practices

Make realities (and reality checking) salient by addressing inequalities and alleviating frustrations in individuals and collectives

Analytical challenge: Overcome infatuation with trust and traditional measures, and invest in novel conceptualizations and measures that uncover its psychological properties and functions

# Tackling the Void of Confidence: Investing on Uncertainty as Opportunity for Building Confidence

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**Uncertainty**: affectively positive, negative, neutral. Uncertainty is not always bad/negative/motive inconsistent → opens an **opportunity**

Confidence [emotional mechanism] =/ doubt


⇒ knowledge & information regarding efficacy & moral reliability  
[information, structures, institutions]

⇒ high certainty that outcome will be in accordance with expectations

⇒ safety, admiration, enthusiasm

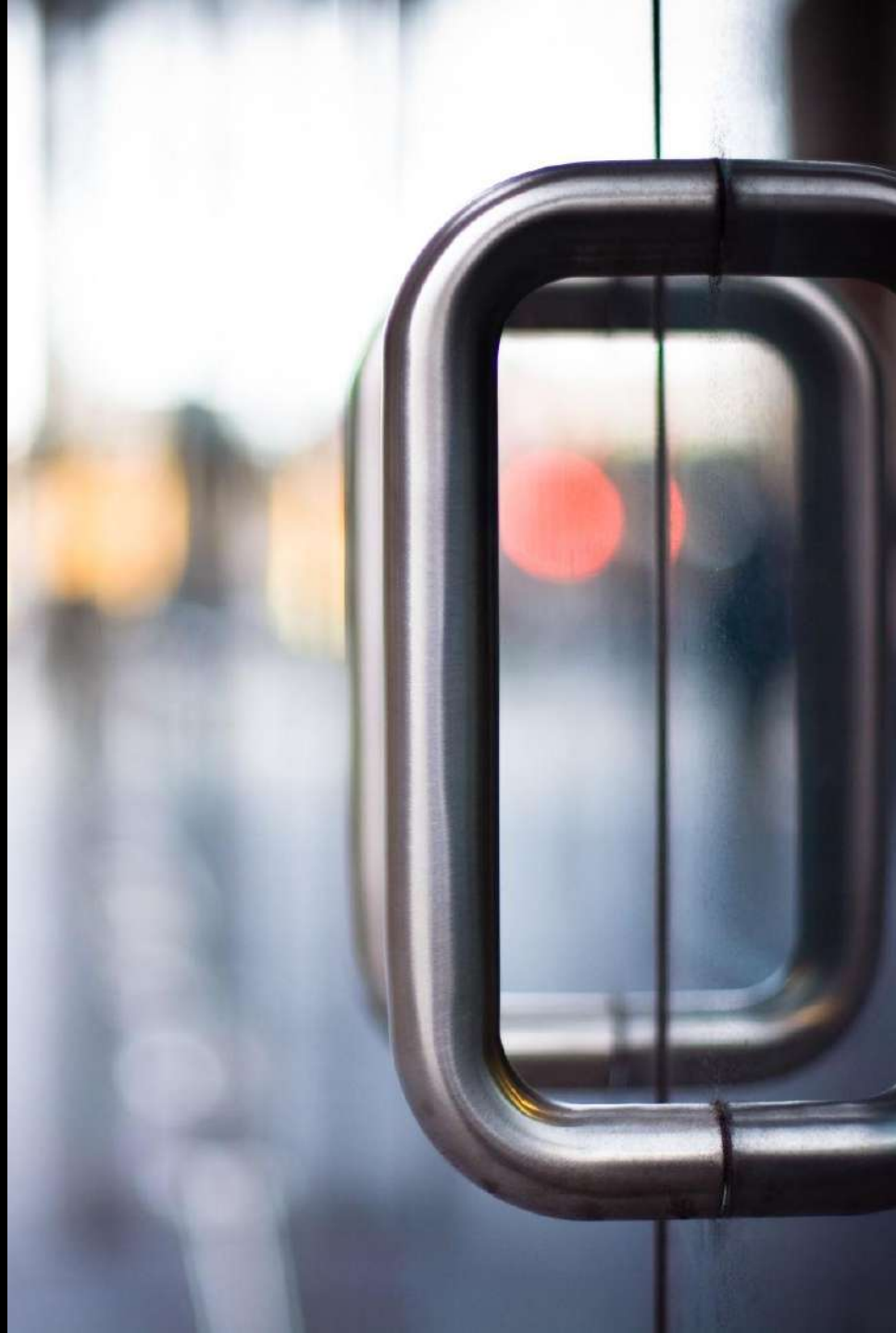
# PLEDGE Horizon Europe (Feb2024)

## Survey measures

- Trust /Confidence (Eurobarometer)
  - Orientation towards uncertainty
  - Information attainment
  - Identification & Orientation towards Uncertainty Objects
  - Identification and orientation towards the Trust objects
  - Intent for cooperative /pro-democratic outcomes
  - Individual sense of efficacy
  - Reactionism scale
  - Ressentiment scale
  - Col. Narcissism scale
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# First steps for the study of trust in the era of grievance politics

- Separate the object of uncertainty from the object of trust.
- Positive orientation to the other depends on building affective competence skillsets for managing affective ambivalence and resisting *ressentimentful* politics
- Invest in building confidence







### **The ‘So What’ point:**

Psychological mapping of trust in the era of resentful victimhood & grievance politics

Trust is difficult: political and societal implications of this universal feature of human psychology, with psychological impact: compromised reality testing in *ressentiment*

### **The larger point:**

Democracy as an Achievement: ability to recognize conflict within the self as well as see conflict outside the self” (Winnicott, 1950)

**Thank you**

**Tereza Capelos**

**[t.capelos@soton.ac.uk](mailto:t.capelos@soton.ac.uk)**

# Related Works on Grievance Politics

**Capelos, T., Salmela, M., Sullivan G, Chrona, S. (2023)** The Anti-social Triad of Grievance Politics: An Integrated Model of Reactionism, *Ressentiment* and Collective Narcissism, *American Behavioral Scientist*, [in press].

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**Damasio, A. (1999).** *The Feeling of What Happens: Body, Emotion and the Making of Consciousness*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Publishing.

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**Luhmann, N. (1988).** Familiarity, Confidence, Trust: Problems and Alternatives. In D. Gambetta (Ed.), *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (pp. 94-107). New York: Basil Blackwell.

**Demertzis, N. (2020).** *The political sociology of emotions: Essays on trauma and resentment*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351212472>

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