

The Pleasures of Resentment

Is the US Treasury anti-Semitic, anti-Italian, anti-German, anti-Polish, anti-Irish, anti-Catholic, anti- many other groups that could be named, none of whose descendants has ever appeared on an American banknote? Hitherto, those that have appeared have all been old dead white males, such as Washington and Lincoln.

This is all to change now: Harriet Tubman, the black abolitionist and suffragist, is to replace Andrew Jackson (admittedly not altogether a nice character, while Tubman was a most remarkable one) on the \$20 bill. An article in the *Guardian* by a black author gloated over the fact than from 2020, white folks will see a black face every time they use such a bill for making a purchase.

This has been hailed as progress in the equalisation of American society, and is typical of the gestural politics of our time. Strangely enough, though, the gestures never seem to assuage resentment, but seem rather to accentuate and aggravate it. They are never enough and more are demanded. It is a bit like the Cultural Revolution, during which no confession was ever grovelling enough for the Red Guards and no admission ever of sufficient crimes.

In part this may be because deeper or more important realities – for example, the excess of crime or poor educational achievement – remain refractory to change. When people feel impotent to change what they dislike, they are apt to turn their efforts on to something that they *can* change, on the great kick-the-cat principle. But I do not think this can be the whole, or even a major part, of the explanation.

Resentment is a self-reinforcing emotion which it takes great effort to control. I doubt whether there can be many people who do not, or at any rate could not, know this from direct

personal experience. And resentment is an emotion that satisfies (in a sour way) and can keep its embers burning for a whole lifetime, unlike any other emotion.

Why have famous people at all on banknotes, or for that matter on stamps? Why teach children anything about them? The fact that you have to choose among them makes the teaching inherently invidious. After all, famous people are by definition not representative of the population as a whole, and there can be no finer or higher virtue than to be representative of the population as a whole, and no worse vice than *not* being representative of the population as a whole. Let us praise ordinary men – in other words, let us praise ourselves.

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