5. Conclusions

Affective Societies and the Political

We are now in a position to address the popular diagnosis which holds that the political realm is currently experiencing a sharp rise in affect and emotionality. As stated in the introduction, we agree that significant changes are transpiring that require further investigation. In this sense, we consider the ever-growing scholarly literature and media discourse on the current crisis of liberal democracy to be justified. It is justified as an indicator for the widespread experience of rapid transformations impacting many aspects of everyday life. For instance, the pressing questions of climate change and global warming are not only an urgent environmental problem but also an economic one, with implications for the wellbeing – and even the existence – of human civilization. Recent technological advancements in robotics and automation threaten low-wage, unqualified labour, while neoliberal work models render the middle classes increasingly precarious. Internet and social media are accelerating our capacity to gather private information, making it very easy to effectively control populations. Current democracies appear ill-equipped to respond to these challenges. Moreover, they do not adequately recognize new forms of identification and belonging, and have thus been unable to fulfill the demands of identity politics for new subjectivities. These developments have surely contributed to the rise of authoritarian nationalisms in the USA, Europe, Turkey, Brazil, the Philippines and many other countries. While the discourse on the current crisis of democracy is an important indicator of these shifts, it has not satisfactorily diagnosed the nature of the crisis and the socio-economic-technological transformations that underlie it.

To be sure, we are not in a position to fare any better in accounting for the complexity of current developments. Our case studies do not qualify us to provide a general diagnosis of current transformations, not even on the changing role of affect and emotions in the political realm. Our studies are widely scattered across different social, political and cultural contexts, both within and beyond Western

liberal democracies, and it is impossible to say whether they point to a general, globally aligned affective shift in the political. Moreover, our case studies lack the historical depth and magnitude necessary for developing hypotheses about historic changes in the affective and emotional composition of the political realm.

Fortunately, generating such hypotheses was not the aim of our endeavour. On the contrary, the key idea of affective societies guiding our project opposes striving for such grand theory. Instead, it provides reasons to be skeptical that a comprehensive, all-encompassing picture of current socio-political, economic, and technological transformations can be given, and it urges caution about easy explanations for complex and multidimensional dynamics. However, that does not mean that the perspective we are advancing is without theoretical consequences or explanatory power. In this conclusion, we summarize what an affective societies perspective on the political implies in terms of an ontology, an epistemology, and an ethics of the political.

ON ONTOLOGY

The idea of affective societies provides a framework for thinking about the social and the political in terms of affective relationality. The claim that interactive dynamics of affecting and being affected form the core of all socio-material relations allows us to see that politics and the political have always been affective, and necessarily so. However, we do not seek to formulate a metaphysics of affect (Massumi 2002, Thrift 2008). The aim of our research is not to establish yet another grand theory, this time about affective politics. Rather, it is to introduce a plurality of disciplinary perspectives on research about a subject that is itself plural and multiple to the highest degree. The theoretical approach that we adopted and carved out in the course of our inquiries, what we called the 'affective societies perspective', is rather ill-suited for grand theory. It provides a 'thin theory' of the social. It is precisely this modest social theory that compelled our cautious stance with regard to the diagnosis that what we are witnessing in current politics is an increase in affect. Rather than offering such a grand theory, we set out to inquire into some empirical cases that necessarily provide a limited epistemological scope. This corresponds with our proposition that research on affect and emotion should always proceed from a plurality of affective modes. Indeed, this plurality extends not only synchronously across and within cultures, but also diachronically through history.

An affective societies perspective on the political allows us to examine how affective dynamics open political spaces, structure them in ambiguous and

conflictual fashions, and close them again by channelling political decisions which, themselves, are always normative and capable of leading to political action. In chapter 2, we showed that publics are made by drawing on affective dynamics and eliciting emotions. In chapter 3, we focused on the (often implicit) negotiation processes that those political publics entail. We showed that such processes involve a range of ambiguous emotional registers, making it impossible to distinguish a priori between political and a-political, progressive and reactionary, or 'good' and 'bad' emotions. In chapter 4, we highlighted the connections between affectivity and normativity that such processes of public negotiation imply. These connections point directly to how the problem of living together is framed discursively and experientially. This interplay depends on and registers all kinds of tendencies over a broad spectrum of social and cultural phenomena: the news cycle of network TV, internet, and newspapers; therapeutic interventions into the lives of individuals; the discourse on justice in the prosecution of war crimes; transformations in the poetics of genre cinema; the negotiation of behaviour in spiritual communities; or the everyday practices of child-rearing. In their very different ways, all these phenomena influence, or are influenced by, the development, articulation, or fixation of emotional repertoires. These repertoires, in turn, mediate the perspectives of individual actors.

ON EPISTEMOLOGY

Based on these thin ontological commitments and their relevance for our case studies, we are able to comment on the current crisis literature. Our general claim is that political processes have not become more emotional, nor will they ever become less affective. This is, of course, a theoretical claim that is based on our understanding of affect and emotions as co-constituting phenomena of all societies and social domains, including the political. Such a claim may not be very satisfying in itself, as it cannot be verified by our case studies. Nor does it shed light on the phenomenological fact that current political transformations in Western democracies are widely experienced as an increase in affect. Thus, we need to say more about the consequences of the affective societies approach in terms of social diagnostics.

While we cannot address this issue head-on, the core idea of affective societies allows us to reframe the question. Instead of examining the reasons and consequences of an alleged affective intensification in the political realm, we propose to pursue the following question: Can we locate any shifts in the political workings of affects and emotions that may explain this perception of the political as

increasingly affectively charged? We do not believe that taking this rise for granted helps elucidate what these shifts are or how they operate; on the contrary. Rather, we suggest focusing the attention on current developments, such as the emergence of new modes of affectivity and emotional communication that transgress the common, well established feeling rules (Hochschild 1983) that govern the emotional repertoire of the political realm. Because these new modes differ from what is considered the normal workings of politics, they attract special attention and are experienced as particularly forceful.

Thus, our affective societies perspective implies an epistemological thesis: Affect is usually experienced, or at least experienced most forcefully, when it is encountered as the 'affect of others'. When people experience society as increasingly affective, this is an indicator that affective relations and emotional repertoires are changing. Since affect is, so to speak, everywhere, it only becomes noticeable when its modalities shift. As long as modes of emotion and affect conform to established and expectable patterns of the political, they hardly enjoy any special attention. It is only when emotional and affective aspects of the political disrupt normative patterns that they come into view as affectivity and emotionality per se. In other words, the affective nature of the political makes itself manifest whenever a tension arises. Such tension may arise when one's contribution to society's well-being appears to be disregarded by others; it can creep up slowly in the act of reading while encountering an odd phrase; it may result from being disembedded from one's familiar surroundings. Whatever the case may be, such tension manifests affectively.

Several of our case studies demonstrate that certain modes of affect and emotion are perfectly compatible with the established vision of politics as a rational procedure, while others are not. Scientists, for example, may express enthusiasm about their research project, curiosity for their colleges' insights, excitement about their new findings or embarrassment about failures, without compromising the overall image of science as a rational undertaking. Furthermore, particular emotion concepts may already be infused with more or less political credibility. Indignation, for instance, which is sometimes characterized as rather disruptive, is frequently considered a 'good' or appropriate emotion, and is often even demonstrated by politicians themselves. For instance, in the context of a peaceful protest, few observers would consider the public expression of indignation as a problematic emotionalization, but rather as the normal working of a healthy liberal democracy. However, things would look rather different if emotions such as rage, resentment or even hatred were ascribed to the same protesters. Such an interpretation would most likely support the diagnosis that the political arena is overly emotionalized or affectively charged. Thus, emotions like indignation, which tends to be

considered as justified or righteous anger, may appear to be compatible with deliberative political procedures without necessarily feeding into an impression of the political as unduly emotional. Other emotions, such as rage, resentment or hatred, are more readily understood in juxtaposition to rational political procedures, and thus may reinforce an image of the political realm as overly affectively charged.

However, it is crucial to consider the political and cultural context as well as the political and social positions of the involved actors. These contexts critically determine whether particular emotional manifestations are experienced as a general affective intensification or not. In some contexts, public indignation may be widely considered as a dangerous affective mobilization, while in others, rage and the threat of direct retribution may be part of normal political negotiations. A tendency that can often be observed is that one more easily ascribe (irrational) emotional motivations to the political claims of the opposite camp than to one's own political claims. And if new, hitherto marginal groups, be it migrants or lower-class workers, increasingly enter into the political arena, they may appear to more established groups as mostly emotionally driven. Thus, the particular display and feeling rules of a given political arena influence whether political expressions are perceived as emotionally charged or not.

ON ETHICS

Scholars are not immune to this epistemological situation. On the contrary, the current literature on the crisis of liberal democracy is a particularly suitable example of the pattern just described. Scholars are commonly trained to produce research that is unbiased by emotions, and tend to represent themselves within their scholarship as emotion-free agents. Yet the very premise of emotion-free neutrality overlooks the fact that all knowledge production – whether academic or non-academic – is affective. By contrast, they experience, and therefore assess, the transformation of socio-political conditions as an excess of affectivity or emotionality on the part of those who, presumably, obstruct the functioning of liberal democracies. Some scholars even go so far as to suggest that the only way for supporters of democracy to regain their power is by taking control over the field of emotional attachments that they consider to be manipulated by the right-wing. This particular approach to the current power struggle over public sentiments is a strong focus of the crisis literature's research agenda. Yet, paradoxically, this same crisis literature tends to overlook its own affective engagements or sensibilities. We, on the other hand, contend that, any researcher who experiences and declares

the current situation as an ultimate crisis is necessarily bringing her own affective situatedness into the question. Contrary to this literature on crisis, we argue that it is essential for researchers of political crisis to explicitly account for the affective arrangements within which they research and produce this knowledge.

We do not, by any means, want to give the impression that we find fault in the drive towards a diagnosis of the present. We do not find this to be a futile project; on the contrary. Engaging in a reflection on the present and its genealogy is precisely what we understand to be the critical work of the humanities and the social sciences today. While we have shown our skepticism about characterizations of an unprecedented 'increase' in affect, we also decidedly welcome and recognize the importance of giving an account of the present. We believe it is urgent to turn our attention to our own present by fostering what Michel Foucault (1984) called an 'ethos of critique.' Our aim in this essay has been to provide some clues and examples that can help to push this critical project further. In this context, it is important to note that we are not exactly advocating relativism when we emphasize that affective dynamics and their normative evaluation are context dependent. We do claim that it is impossible to evaluate the normative character of affective and emotional modalities beyond the sense they receive within specific affective arrangements and repertoires of emotion. Yet we do not support the claim that no morally relevant distinction can be made. On the contrary, our findings point to the necessity of weighing conflicting alternatives against each other and making normative judgments. This suggests that political agents must often take the risk of making morally charged political decisions. They need to make these decisions within a given space of political possibilities that is always affectively co-constituted. And in doing so, they must run the constant risk of getting it wrong.

What does this scenario mean for the role of the social sciences and humanities? To broach this question, we must consider the status of critique in these disciplines. Within some parts of the humanities and social sciences, and quite notably within affect studies, the very notion of critique has recently come under scrutiny. This scrutiny is worth our attention, as it entails a number of conceptual consequences. The critique of critique, as it were, has highlighted the prevalence of certain styles and habits of thought, and raised a number of important questions. For instance: does the aim of critically 'debunking' or 'demystifying' one's object of study end up preventing researchers from getting a real sense for the complexity and richness of the material we study? Is engaging in critique not a powerful marker of social distinction, and if so, what are the consequences of lifting the scholar above his or her object in this way? More fundamentally, does the critical impetus to point out the social construction of the world risk "running out of steam" (Latour 2004)? If so, what does this mean at a political moment shaped by

actors who seek to 'relativize' climate change or to casually propagate 'alternative facts'? We share many of these troublesome and still very timely questions, and they clearly inform the 'thin' approach of the 'affective societies perspective'. While some have celebrated the category of affect as a way out of these questions, and sometimes even as a way out of critique, we rather understand affect as a lens through which to better understand the practice of politics, including critique.

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Addressing the political from the perspective of affective societies implies a threefold claim. First, this perspective contains the ontological premise that affect is everywhere, since it considers affective relations as constitutive of all societies and social domains. This ontological premise may not in itself prove particularly convincing or informative. Yet the methodological angle it enables proves highly relevant for envisioning an approach to social theory that can foster a diagnostic of the present. Secondly, this ontological premise entails a particular epistemological claim: namely, that affect usually goes unnoticed when the workings of the social and the political follow commonly established patterns. By contrast, according to this view, the experience of an increased affective intensity occurs when there is a felt difference vis a vis the established pattern, for example in the form of a shift or a tension between emotional repertoires. When we observe how affective dynamics open, structure, or close political spaces, it becomes apparent that morally charged political decisions cannot be avoided. Thirdly, there is an ethical implication to consider for political agents, who must make normative judgments and engage in political action within an ambiguous field of contesting forces. This bears implications for scholars in the social sciences and humanities, who cannot comport themselves as if they were unaffected by prevalent affective modalities. Scholars are increasingly compelled to acknowledge their own stakes within all kinds of affective relations – political and otherwise.