1. Introduction

The Politics of Affective Societies

It has become a common lament of our time that democratic discourse and decision-making are increasingly less rational and more affective. The rise to power of anti-intellectual right-wing nationalists; the renaissance of racist resentment in public discourse; the proliferation of 'fake news' that people believe no matter what; the crisis of credibility in the sciences, be it on climate change or other matters – these and similar developments are described by social and political theorists as symptoms of how the politics of the gut triumph over the politics of the intellect. Recent works on affect and politics have argued that contemporary societies are becoming increasingly affective (Massumi 2015), and have highlighted the ways Western democracies are plagued by a "populist moment" (Mouffe 2018) and a "monarchy of fear" (Nussbaum 2018). This perspective challenges more traditional approaches that analyse modernity as a process of rationalization culminating in the triumph of liberal democratic governance based on rational deliberation.

Some interpret this increase in affectivity as a "regression" (Geiselberger 2017) to a pre-modern state, and regard the model of Western democratic governance as threatened by nationalist and nativist "retrotopias" (Bauman 2017). Others identify this rise as a specific structural characteristic of Western late modernity (Reckwitz 2018). Both, however, concur that an *increase* of affect, of emotion mark the politics of contemporary societies. For better or worse, these narratives suggest that the time of rational deliberation and orderly procedures belongs to the past. In our contemporary modernity, politics itself has become affective. That which had been 'repressed' and 'controlled' in modern societies – affect, emotion, passion, desire – now takes centre stage.

In the context of these diagnoses, affect and emotion tend to appear as synonymous with affective states such as anger, hatred and fear. However, these portrayals of affect and emotion also hint at larger and more diffuse semantic fields:

the uncontrolled, even uncontrollable, the 'wild' and 'uncivilised', the chaotic masses, the raging mob. This surely is what makes the diagnosis of an excess of affect so powerful in the present, in light of rising demonstrations of right-wing violence and general resurgence of right-wing politics across the political landscapes around the Globe.

In this essay, we take affect seriously both as a concept in social theory and as a tool for understanding the present. We thus argue for an approach that respects both of these modes of thinking without conflating or converging the two all too quickly. Such an approach allows us to develop our understanding of affect and emotions as central qualities of the social at large. However, this endeavor calls for a broad perspective. It requires us to think of all social interactions, practices, structures and actions as having to do with feeling, attachment, attunement and sense, in the broadest meanings of these words. Societies are always *affective societies* (Slaby/Scheve 2019). The title of this essay reflects that perspective: Rather than 'the affective politics of contemporary societies', as the aforementioned accounts of the present might have it, we want to interrogate the politics of affective societies' against the backdrop of this broad social theory. The gist of our argument is as follows: If indeed there is a change in the ways politics and the political are presently taking shape – and we tend to agree that there is –, this change is best understood qualitatively in terms of changing affective relations, rather than as a simple quantitative rise. Our sensitivity to this qualitative dimension leads us to a certain skepticism vis-a-vis 'grand' theories that currently seem to dominate the debate.

Sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2018), for instance, argues that an increase in affect has noteworthy implications for the history of modernity. He takes the tendency towards universalization – what he calls 'doing generality' – as the dominant modus operandi of *classical* modernity, and argues that these processes of universalization specifically work in conjunction with dynamics of rationalization. By contrast, he identifies *late* modernity as displaying an alignment towards the singular – 'doing singularity' – which is driven by new dynamics of increasing affection. Even though Reckwitz' complex sociology of late modernity does provoke a productive perspective on our present, we remain wary of the opposition between rationality and affect that characterizes this theoretical framework. We take up Bruno Latour's (1993) skepticism towards modernity's self-description as an epoch governed – and haunted – by rationality and reason. We are inclined to agree that "we have never been modern", and also tend to proclaim that: "we have never been rational". From our perspective, the notion that modernity has turned affective does not lead us very far.

A similar narrative can be found in the latest book of political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2018), although it is based on different theoretical premises and empirical observations, and is restricted to a much shorter period of time. Focusing on the changing political hegemonies in Western Europe after 1945, Mouffe identifies two dominant paradigms of liberal democratic governance: a social-democratic consensus based on Keynesian economic principles in the post-war decades, and a neoliberal consensus that replaced it around the 1980s. The financial crisis of 2007-2008, Mouffe claims, made manifest the incipient disintegration of the neoliberal paradigm, and led to what Mouffe calls a "populist moment." While Mouffe regards the period of neoliberal politics as one of affect-less post-politics, she identifies an increase in affect as one of the main elements of the current populist moment. However, in contrast to Reckwitz, who displays a neutral or even slightly worried attitude towards this re-emergence of affect, Mouffe explicitly welcomes this populist moment and its presumably increasing potential for affection. This attitude stems from her conviction that new modes of affection are required to overcome the post-politics of neoliberal governance, and that this is the only available path towards a potential radicalization of democracy. In that sense, her political theory is also based on a conceptual juxtaposition of affective and non-affective modes of politics.

In contrast to this broad trend in contemporary debate, we contend that affect and emotion are present in all kinds of political practices – including the rational ones. We therefore suggest that one should analyse current developments qualitatively, in terms of changing modes and calibrations of affective and emotional registers rather than focusing on an increased quantity or scale of affect. But before we proceed with presenting the consequences for thinking politics, we will use this first chapter to briefly discuss the contemporary debate on "the political" in the context of normative democracy models, in order to pinpoint where we think that common accounts get it wrong.

So, how do the leading paradigms in political thought conceive the connection between politics and affect? Within this debate, deliberative democracy models in the tradition of liberal political theories (Ryan 2012) stand opposite to antagonistic democracy models in the tradition of post-foundational political theories (Marchart 2007).

Within the liberal tradition, models of deliberative democracy highlight that a minimum moral consensus is needed for democratic institutions to work under conditions of pluralism. This consensus can best be achieved by reason-based and affect-less deliberation under free and equal conditions. Therefore, the core task of politics is to establish and achieve acceptable decision-making procedures that allow the best arguments to succeed. To this end, models of deliberative

democracy traditionally focus on the *procedural* aspect of politics. They ask which procedures and institutions are necessary for the realization of a collective rationality. The focal point of liberal thinking is thus the endeavor to organize the political public by way of instituting a rational decision-making procedure.

Post-foundational theorists, in contrast, build on Martin Heidegger's (1975: 22) distinction between the ontological and the ontic (the ontological difference). They insist on the existence of the political beyond the legal-procedural and consensus-orientated logic of politics. Post-foundationalists accuse liberal theory of putting forth the wrong ideal about the formation of free and equal citizens, and of failing to acknowledge what contingency and plurality really imply. Political subjects cannot simply shed the particularity of their way of life once they enter the public stage. Instead, this particularity is the precondition for communication in the first place. Therefore, a functioning democracy (which still should have a commitment to freedom and equality) needs a vital clash of competing positions. Thus, instead of stabilization and order, they focus on the 'absent ground' that both exceeds and defines regular politics. This absent ground is a feature identified with an antagonism that can never be fully integrated into a legal-procedural structure (Marchart 2018).

While we will not review this debate at length, we believe that it illustrates some of the key strands of thinking on the relationship between emotions and the political. Liberal political thought places reason at the centre of its normative conception of political space. This focus is exemplified by the contractualist tradition of John Rawls (1971) and the deliberative approach of Jürgen Habermas (1989). As a consequence of this reason-centered model, affect and emotions (implicitly conceptualized as antithetical to reason) remain a blank space in these theoretical frames. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly, liberal political thought regards the presence of emotions in the political space as endangering political processes of deliberation that should be governed by reason.

By contrast, post-foundational theorists such as Chantal Mouffe are more amenable to the idea that the presence of emotions in the political space is suggestive of the presence of the political. Mouffe's (2000) populist democratic theory is a case in point. "Passions" (Mouffe's preferred term) indicate the presence of antagonism, the struggle between 'us' and 'them', as the integral core, the defining feature of the political. In contrast to liberal theories, which place the core role in deliberative decision-making on the individual, Mouffe sees the crucial role of collective identities in politics. Based on strong anti-essentialist convictions (Laclau/Mouffe 1985) she maintains that such identities cannot be conceived of in terms of sociological categories alone. Rather, they are performatively

constituted in processes of identification, which are themselves crucially driven by passions.

However, Rawls, Habermas and Mouffe tend to agree on the role of affect in the political in one important way. All three associate emotions and passions with spontaneity and activity rather than with routine and habit. They only differ in their normative assessment as to whether the disruptive and spontaneous are desirable in the political space or not. Liberalism tends to see the disruptive and spontaneous as a danger for the normative-processual order of the political process. In contrast, post-foundationalism prefers active disruption over orderly process, as it locates the emergence of the political in the spontaneous antagonistic struggle. Affect and spontaneity figure here as ways of undoing normativity, in order to then re-negotiate.

Some currents in liberal political theory have attempted to overcome these quite opposing views on the role of emotions in the political. This is usually achieved by arguing that the presence of emotions in the political sphere is not good or bad *per se*, and that what matters more is the kind of emotions at stake and the extent to which they further or hinder political discourse.

Most notably, Martha Nussbaum (2013) argues that emotions play an important role in liberal democracy. Taking up the criticism from feminist scholarship (see e.g. Bargetz/Sauer 2010) on the exclusion of emotion from politics, Nussbaum argues that liberalism carries an implicit conception of political emotions. For Nussbaum, emotions are political in the sense that their presence in the public space has the power to advance the functioning of political and democratic processes by facilitating better cooperation and deepening the striving for social justice. However, as she has recently emphasized (2018), emotions also have the power to destabilize a political system. As a consequence, Nussbaum sees it as the major task of liberal democratic governance to shape and cultivate valuable or good emotions among its citizens, as doing so leads to a bettering and strengthening of political culture. The good emotions are those that connect with feelings of tolerance, openness to the ideas of others, kindness and moderation. Nussbaum identifies emotions like hope and love as playing such a foundational role for liberal democracy. By contrast, she identifies negative emotions as those that weaken tolerance among citizens and erode their identification with democratic institutions. In particular, she singles out negative emotions like fear, anger, disgust and envy as deeply problematic for democratic self-governance: "Fear all too often blocks rational deliberation, poisons hope, and impedes constructive cooperation for a better future." (Nussbaum 2018: 1)

However, Nussbaum's preference for emotions she considers as good for democracy are not approved by all. Post-foundationalists seem to be in favour of

other emotions in the political sphere, including some that are characterized as "negative emotions" (Mihai 2016) by many liberal theorists. The post-foundational focus on antagonism at least implicitly suggests certain other emotions to be most relevant in the political space: indignation, anger and other affective and emotional modes that make antagonism manifest, and that invigorate political struggle. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2017), who share some of the insights of post-foundational thought, comment on the kinds of affective modes they ascribe to their envisioned political subject of social transformation, the "multitude":

> A Prince is emerging at the horizon, a Prince born of the passion of the multitude. Indignation at the corrupt policies that continually fill the feeding troughs of bankers, financiers, bureaucrats, and the wealthy; outrage at the frightening levels of social inequality and poverty; anger and fear at the destruction of the earth and its ecosystems; and denunciation of the seemingly unstoppable systems of violence and war. (2017, xxi)

We agree with Nussbaum and her post-foundational counterparts that political formations correspond to specific emotional repertoires, and that political formations get into trouble when these emotional repertoires lose their stabilizing force. However, we are skeptical regarding a clear-cut classification of politically good and bad emotions. Moreover, since Nussbaum champions a universalist understanding of emotions, she is blind to the constitutive ambivalence of political affectivity, and thus cannot properly account for the historic and cultural variability of political affect and emotions. On the other hand, Hardt and Negri's vitalist account of social change puts too much emphasis on the exceptional, emergent, and self-evident status of political affect.

As this brief overview shows, there is disagreement about the role of emotions in politics within the field of political theory, and especially within the contentious debate between liberalism and post-foundationalism. Some question whether the presence of emotions indicates a problem for the political process, as implicitly is the case for Rawls and Habermas, while others disagree about the presence of the political per se, as is explicitly Mouffe's case. Meanwhile, those who acknowledge that emotions play an integral role in the political, nevertheless disagree about the kinds of emotions that are desirable for a political space in good working condition (Nussbaum: love; Hardt/Negri: indignation). But despite these disagreements, we believe that one can identify at least three basic assumptions present in all these theories, albeit to different degrees. They can be articulated in three dichotomies that form the basis for theorizing the connection of emotion and affect as well as politics and the political across different theoretical camps.

A first common dichotomy in this realm is the categorial differentiation between the rational and the emotional. This dichotomy presumes that emotions are either present in the political space, or entirely absent from it. In the absence of emotion, rational discourse governs political processes. The second dichotomy differentiates between those emotions that are 'good', and those that are 'bad' for the political sphere. The third dichotomy is between affect and judgment: Here, judgment frameworks, which play an important role in the political, are aligned with ideas of the rational and orderly. On the other hand, affect is associated with notions of rupture, subversion and, in essence, the vital energies of 'life' itself. As a result, judgment often comes in the form of routines and habits, whereas affect epitomizes spontaneity. This is not only evident in traditional social theory, which tended to concentrate on the normative side of this opposition, but also in more recent studies on affect with their preference for vitalism and event.

In this book, we tend to reject all three dichotomies as a basis of our thinking on affect, emotion and the political. In the following chapters, we present material from the research projects we have been engaged in for some time now. Our guiding principle has been to take a bottom-up approach to understanding how affect and emotion shape the workings of the political. Doing so, we maintain, demands a certain theoretical openness, and a readiness to tackle the field beyond the limits of current debates in political theory. As a basis for approaching our case studies, we thus propose working concepts for affect and emotion, as well as for the political, that do not presuppose these three dichotomies.

We make frequent use of the terms 'affect' and 'emotion' to make our arguments. There are two aspects we would like to highlight in relation to this terminology. The first aspect points to our interdisciplinary background. 'Affect' is the older of the two terms and has a long tradition in the humanities. More recently, it has often been used in the wake of cultural studies-oriented affect research that is in discussion with the critical neurosciences and philosophy. Affect studies has gained some prominence in the humanities disciplines such as literary studies, film studies, theatre studies and art history (Gregg/Seigworth 2010). The term 'emotion' was not used much before the 19th century, and is more common in social science research, often in discussion with psychology. Traditionally, such research has been carried out in anthropology, sociology, and political science (Greco/Stenner 2008). We use both terms to highlight the interdisciplinary discussion we develop in this book.

Secondly, and more importantly, we deploy a broad understanding of both 'affects' and 'emotions', which can include notions others describe with terms such as 'passions', 'sentiments', 'feelings', 'sensations', 'desires' etc. Our use of affect and emotion in this way reflects the complex and intertwined genealogy of these

concepts that we cannot revisit at length here. We propose a much broader understanding of the workings of affects and emotions than that typically treated in the political theory literature we have reviewed – especially concerning the binary pre-assumptions they seem to carry. Before providing a preliminary idea of our affective societies approach, let us briefly address what we find problematic about each of the three dichotomies.

First, both the emotion and the affect research deconstruct the idea that the rational and the emotional can and should be separated. On the one hand, the idea of emotions as containing cognitive appraisals is an integral theoretical assumption of social science emotion research. In this view the neat separation of cognitive processes (rational) and biological processes (emotional) makes no sense (Röttger-Rössler/Markowitsch 2009; Bens/Zenker 2019; Scheve/Slaby 2019; Thonhauser 2019). On the other hand, the concept of affect as a relational phenomenon emerging between bodies makes it impossible to think about a moment without affect (Slaby 2016; Slaby/Mühlhoff 2019). A body's capacity (to affect and to be affected) does not coincide with a fixed set of feelings and emotions, but shapes and affects all modes of existence – with 'the rational' being one of them. In our second chapter we present some material that speaks against the assumption of a divide between rational and emotional politics. Instead, we argue that in the practice of making things public and private, the political space is always affectively co-produced.

Second, we are skeptical about the notion that theory can serve as the basis for determining which emotions further political processes and which foreclose them. Building on the principle that affect and emotions are omnipresent phenomena in all human interaction, we contend that, in the context of politics, all kinds of affective relations and emotional experiences can emerge. It would be hasty to presume in advance which of these affective and emotional phenomena cultivate or hamper political processes. The reverse is true as well: affect theory, in the line of Spinoza and Deleuze, forces us to acknowledge that 'the political' and its associations and dissociations (commonality and antagonism) occur in various contexts. We suggest that questions about the relation between affect and the political cannot be resolved beyond the level of practice. Before drawing any conclusions based on such questions we must first ask how various modes of affect and emotion operate in our research material. Assessing which modes of affect and emotion are 'good' or 'bad' for political processes is a normative determination one should only make after grounded research, and not before. In our third chapter, we argue instead that the affective dynamics that constitute the political always create ambivalences and that both conflict and consent are affective modes of political engagement.

Third, since we hold that affects and emotions cannot be reduced to particular domains, we also argue that they cannot be narrowly localized within moments of spontaneity, dynamism, movement and rupture. Social science research on emotion and sentiments (Frijda 1994; Bens/Zenker 2019) and certain strands of affect research (Stewart 2007; Bargetz 2016) have directed us to localize affect and emotions in the routine of the everyday and the mundane. That also means that any divide which associates affect with critique on the one side, and rationality with normative judgment on the other, becomes porous. In our fourth chapter we make the argument that judgment, like critique, is always affectively constituted.

In order to be able to trace the workings of affects and emotions in the political, we propose a slim working concept of the political. Although we have taken the theoretical debates between liberal theorists and post-foundational theorists as a starting point for our discussion, we find it prudent to refrain from hastily positioning ourselves vis-à-vis these debates on the nature of the political. However, we contend that even the most precarious concept of the political needs to encompass at least three key dimensions: power, normativity, and publicness.

The first dimension is power. We take relations of power to be inherent to all social relations and all human interactions. For the political to emerge, however, power relations need to be 'negotiated' (although not always explicitly). A minimal condition for the political to emerge is that inherent power relations are made manifest in their contestability. As such, the political foregrounds the conflictual nature of the social, and usually involves an element of contestation. This leads to the second dimension of the political, which is its (often implicit) relation to normativity. The political usually entails negotiating, debating, or at least positioning oneself with regard to 'right' and 'wrong' or 'good' and 'bad' in a given context. Finally, politics need publics in which such contestation and negotiation can take place. These publics can be actual or potential, they can be addressed by speech or action, and they can appear as present or imagined within cultural performances, texts, films and works of art. Yet in all cases, publics involve the manifestation of power relations and their normative evaluation.

We start our investigation of the political from these three dimensions, of power, normativity and publicness. Taking these dimensions as our point of departure allows us to keep our theoretical scope open enough to broach domains that are usually not treated in works on politics, thus enabling us to trace the political from its mundane everyday iterations to the grand scale. Moreover, restricting our notion of the political to these dimensions allows us to move beyond an exclusive consideration of liberal-democratic societies, and towards a conception of the political that can traverse all kinds of societies and social settings.

What we generally propose is a certain theoretical openness and a more grounded approach to theorising the role played by affect and emotions in the workings of the political. As such, we situate our research projects within the theoretical framework we call *affective societies*. By affective societies, we explicitly do not mean to suggest that societies have become increasingly affective in recent years as the result of certain historical developments (like the shift to late modernity or the crisis of neoliberalism). Nor do we suggest that some societies are more prone to affectivity than others, as in traditional Western representations of a rift between the rational West and its affective others. On a very basic level, the concept of affective societies implies the opposite: namely, that affect and emotions are present in all human interaction and in all aspects of the social. What changes is not the absence or presence of affects and emotions, but rather the modes and calibrations of the affective and emotional registers that emerge. In our final chapter, we argue that our affective societies approach has specific implications for a political ontology, political epistemology and political ethics. In this respect, we see this book as a contribution to understanding the role of affect and emotions in our contemporary politics, and as a means to stimulate a deeper appreciation of the intricate relationship between affect, emotions and the political more generally.