

Chapter 30

Political Affect

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Abstract

This entry carves out two central segments of the meaning of “political affect” without aspiring to an exhaustive analysis. In the first half of the text, we will explore the ontological proximity between “affect and the political” in a philosophical key, drawing on Spinoza’s considerations on the affect-politics nexus. Spinoza sketches a vision of a radically democratic polity in which individuals realize their potential by forming affective alliances that jointly strive for insights into what enables or hinders their thriving. However, such *active affects of allegiance* present only one possible way to flesh out the philosophical meaning of “political affect” – other options will be discussed as well. In the second half of the entry, we draw on Foucault, Ann Stoler and others to explore ways in which affective phenomena get mobilized and regimented in order to support and sustain political rule. This rubric – “affects in politics” – includes a broad range of official and unofficial techniques of governance that target or involve affect, as well the affective modes of resistance that these efforts often evoke.

All political practices are affective. Political action and its institutional and organizational architectures are embedded in and productive of affective dynamics. At the same time, political practices and institutions are dependent on specific forms of affectivity, which may crystallize into prevailing sentiments and emotional orientations. These, in turn, are either conducive to modes of governance or foundational in efforts to resist such demands. The longing for radical change, the wish for soothing security, the commitment to a set of communal values, the denouncement of certain deeds as morally wrong – acts and orientations deeply embedded in all kinds of political processes – cannot be conceived without taking affect into account.

The theme of political affect encompasses a broad spectrum of phenomena and issues, as evidenced by the massive amount and diverse orientation of recent work on political affectivity (e.g., Connolly, 2002; Protevi, 2009; Massumi, 2015; Lordon, 2016; Bargetz & Sauer, 2015) and on political emotions (e.g., Clarke, Hoggett, & Thompson 2006; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; Nussbaum, 2013; Marcus, 2002; Mihai, 2016, Mohrmann, 2015). For the purpose of this text, we propose a relatively broad conceptual outlook that is systematically divided into two segments, corresponding to the two main parts of the chapter. These segments reflect a basic distinction in recent political thought – the one between “politics” and “the political” (Marchart, 2007).

The first segment – *affect and the political* – is predominantly philosophical in nature and asks about the general relation between the political and affectivity. In this regard, the concept of political affect functions in part as a reflective notion, engendering considerations on the ultimate “point” of politics. To substantiate this perspective, we revisit the thought of the early modern philosopher Spinoza, whose work contains crucial aspects of a sophisticated understanding of the relation of affect and the political that we deem exemplary for contemporary approaches. Central is a social conception of freedom that aligns Spinoza’s perspective with more recent associative approaches to the political (e.g., Arendt, 1961). Political affects, in this regard, are chiefly *affects of allegiance*. By contrast, a dissociative understanding of the political, defended by proponents of radical democracy (e.g., Mouffe, 2000), emphasizes difference and intergroup conflict. Here, political affects are primarily adversarial – *affects of antagonism*.

The second segment – *affects in politics* – deals with politics as a regulated sphere of collective action and inquires into the role that affect and emotion play as part of the routines and practices of this sphere. Accordingly, in the second part of this text, we provide various exemplary considerations that fit the rubric of “affective governance, affective resistance”, starting from a broadly Foucault-inspired perspective. Affect and emotion come into view as means and targets of governance, but also as fueling resistance to being governed. This includes a policing of styles of belonging and displays of partisanship – in effect, politically implemented orders of feeling that inflect the practice of

government since at least the advent of the European nation state (Fortier, 2010). Moreover, the second part of our chapter also covers broader cultural programs of constructing and regulating historically specific political formations. Powerful discursive and practical regimes centered on feeling and sentiment were involved not only in the historical construction of race and gender but also more specifically in the construction of certain subpopulations as politically problematic, marking them as targets of biopolitical intervention. This development has been aptly labeled “sentimental biopower” (Schuller, 2018; see also Strick, 2015). Such techniques of affective governance provoke passionate resistance and attempts at destabilization. Analyzing affective struggles in a dialectic of governance and resistance within the realm of politics opens up empirically grounded perspectives on the affective dimension of the political itself.

Affect and the political: Power, collectivity and freedom

Spinoza is among the central philosophical sources informing important strands of affect theory, including the conceptual perspective on relational affect developed in this volume (e.g., → *affect*; → *affective disposition*; → *affective resonance*). This pertains not only to his ontological understanding of affect as a constitutive relationality between all bodies, entities and realities (what Spinoza calls “finite modes”), but also to his political thought. Given the centrality of affective relations as the basic form of constitutive efficaciousness between all that exists – formative power, capacity or *potentia* –, it is not surprising that Spinoza’s views on affect and his political philosophy are closely entwined.¹ In this first part of the chapter, we sketch considerations on the connections between affect and the political that we deem eminently relevant to contemporary concerns of political theory.

Right at the outset of his *Tractatus Politicus*, Spinoza (1677/1951) gives pride of place to “the passions”:

Philosophers conceive of the passions which harass us as vices into which men fall by their own fault, and therefore, generally deride, bewail, or blame them, or execrate them, if they wish to seem unusually pious. ... For they conceive of men, not as they are, but as they themselves would like them to be.

Whence it has come to pass that, instead of ethics, they have generally written satire, and that they have never conceived a theory of politics, which could be turned to use, but such as might be taken for a chimera, or might have been formed in Utopia. (p. 287)

This is a striking plea for realism in political thought, and realism with regard to the affective constitution of human beings in particular. Spinoza consequently theorizes politics not based on the

¹ Our reading of Spinoza is indebted to the interpretive tradition initiated by Deleuze (1981/1988, 1968/1990), and relatedly by the political readings provided by Balibar (1997, 1998) and Negri (1991). More recent inspiration comes from feminist elaborations of Spinozian themes (e.g., Gatens, 2009a; Gatens & Lloyd, 1999; Armstrong, 2009; Sharp, 2005, 2011); from a study by Martin Saar (2013) and an article by Dorothy Kwek (2015).

ideas of political philosophers, who tend to take a detached stance of idealized normativity, but rather with regard to political *practitioners* – Machiavelli notably among them – who derive their insights from their own practical experience (cf. Walther, 1990, pp. 247f.). The particular practical reality that thereby appears is to a fair extent that of affective relations. One can generally say that, for Spinoza, social and political life consists of myriad configurations and arrangements of affective relations and their ongoing dynamics, which, on his perspective, are relations of power. Both individuation and collectivization are affective through and through; by implication, the same is true of the development, modes of existence and eventual transformation of operative political entities, from the various institutions of government to the state or commonwealth as a whole. The “art” of politics, then, amounts to the beneficial arranging and harnessing of the affective energies that circulate within a given social formation, while finding the means to contain or productively re-channel destructive affects.

Four ideas render Spinoza’s approach to the affect-politics nexus particularly relevant for a contemporary understanding of political affect: (1) Constitutive relationality; (2) the thesis that power equals right; (3) the notion of the multitude; (4) freedom as the “point” of politics.

(1) The first and most basic idea is that of an encompassing onto-formative relationality of affecting and being affected among all that finitely exists (→ *affect*; → *affective resonance*). This means that every constituted body or entity – including human individual and collective bodies – is effectively embedded within a historically specific “ecosocial matrix of other bodies, affecting them and being affected by them” (Protevi, 2009, p. 50). This “dynamic sociability grounded in the powers of bodies” (Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, p. 54) leads to a perspective on the inevitable interdependence and mutual constitutive relevance of all entities. It gives rise to a dynamic “politics of relation”, which has seen various elaborations in the more recent history of political thought (cf. e.g., Balibar, 1997; Butler, 2009; Sharp, 2005, 2011).

(2) The second idea results from the combination of this relational ontology with Spinoza’s denial of any transcendent source of legitimation. Within the immanence of the one substance or nature, there is no other source of right than the relationally constituted *potentia* of each finitely existing thing: “the right of each thing extends so far as its determined power extends” (Spinoza, 1670/2007, p. 195).² Combined with Spinoza’s understanding of power as the essential *capacity* of each entity – which is identical to a thing’s dynamic essence – this postulate implies that no individual can ever completely cede all of their power to a political body, on pain of self-annihilation. This makes for a natural limit to the power of a commonwealth, as those governed will continue to possess power of their own and thus remain capable of resistance, and even, under certain conditions, have the capacity to topple their

² Not surprisingly, this is an issue of much debate among Spinoza scholars. We tentatively side with Moira Gatens’ (2009b) assessment; see also Saar (2013, pp. 57-63).

rulers so as to regain control of their political constituency. In particular, no commonwealth or monarch can ever possess more power than the combined power of all individuals governed – the power of the “multitude” (*potentia multitudinis*).³

(3) As the aggregate of all individual *potentias*, the multitude is the founding source and enabling ground of political power and legitimacy. The point of this concept is that it does not unify its constitutive elements (human individuals as carriers of *potentia*) into a single substantive body (such as “a people” or “*das Volk*”), but that it is a non-homogenizing aggregate of individual forces, a multiplicity of distinct yet dynamically – that is: affectively – interrelated actors that, under certain conditions, acquire the capacity to act in concert (cf. Saar, 2013, pp. 350-368). The multitude is the principal subject of politics in Spinoza’s account, a dynamic accretion of agentive potentials capable of both founding and dismantling a polity. Understandably, this notion of a multitude as the radically egalitarian, albeit highly unruly and unpredictable founding instance of political constituencies, has for a long time fired up the imagination of proponents of radical democracy – including the early Marx and those inspired by him (e.g., Hardt & Negri, 2004; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Virno, 2004). The politically ambivalent character of the multitude has likewise been stressed, not least by Spinoza (1677/1985) himself: “The mob is terrifying, if unafraid” (*Ethics*, IV P54S). The multitude is that which carries the original potential for democracy – democracy’s vital substance – but may also be destructive of democracy, as masses are prone to delusions and destructive impulses, and may be seduced by manipulative leaders into hatred and violence (cf. Saar, 2013, pp. 395f.). This ambivalence is closely tied to the affective character of the multitude and accordingly should never be lost sight of in considerations of political affect (cf. Kwek, 2015).

(4) The fourth notable idea presents the ultimate “point” of politics for Spinoza: “the true purpose of the state is in fact freedom” (Spinoza, 1670/2007, p. 252). Among much else, this emphatic orientation towards freedom ties Spinoza’s political thought back to his understanding of affect, in particular, his distinction between *passive affects* – the classical “passions”, which for Spinoza often constitute instances of bondage as opposed to expressions of freedom – and *active affects*, which amount to the realization of an individual’s or a collective’s capacity to act out of rational insight: “Like the Stoics, Spinoza sees the free and virtuous life as a transition from passivity to activity – in his terms, from ‘bondage’ of passion to the free activity of reason” (Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, p. 48).

Accordingly, the decisive criteria for assessing the viability and legitimacy of a polity is whether it enables its constituents to realize and live their potentials – whether it provides conditions conducive to the enjoyment of active affects and thus enables action in line with rational self-understanding (cf. Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, pp. 117-120). At the collective level, the key measure for a polity is

³ See Kwek (2015) on the complicated theme of the power of the multitude, its role in the composition of the commonwealth, and the vexed issue of the unity of the multitude.

accordingly the “free multitude” (*multitudo libera*) – a collective that is constrained in its actions only by those laws that are compatible with the essential characteristics of its constituent members (cf. Saar, 2013, pp. 361-368), and that is on the whole “guided more by hope than by fear”.

Spinoza’s understanding of freedom is complex and runs counter to the main currents of modern thought, especially as freedom is, to him, not a matter of the will, but a matter of knowledge and understanding: insight into necessity (cf. Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, pp. 41-57). Crucially, one must not misconstrue this orientation toward freedom in an individualistic manner, for instance, as an expression of the liberalist conception of individual thriving. This would violate the basic tenet of the relational constitution and thus the foundational interdependence – “transindividuality” – of all finite realities (Balibar, 1997). Spinozian freedom is a social affair, inextricable from collective self-realization and “acting in concert”, as especially feminist interpreters of his writings have convincingly argued (Armstrong, 2009; Sharp, 2011). Again, affect is key here: The identity of an individual is the product of a history of constitutive relations of affecting and being affected, and thus inextricable from formative connections and affective alliances in an enabling milieu. Freedom, then, informed by adequate insight into these formative affective connections, comes with an expanded sphere of selfhood. Its actualization consists in joint action based on these insights – joyful active affects enacted collectively. As Aurelia Armstrong (2009) puts it, freedom or autonomy for Spinoza is “a social process, that is, an effort to build and maintain mutual, reciprocal relationships with others that support and foster this striving for all concerned” (p. 61).

These four points inform a nuanced understanding of emphatically political affect. When things go well, political affects are active affects of allegiance: joyful collective engagements grounded in rational insight into the determining factors of individual and collective existence – freedom realized. It is not too far fetched to see a connection between Spinoza’s views and Arendt’s programmatic claim that the “*raison d’être* of politics is freedom” (Arendt, 1961, p. 146). However, things rarely go well, particularly for “finite modes” such as human beings, as Spinoza would be the first to remind us (cf. Kwek, 2015). In such a context, “political affect” designates affective reactions to prevailing conditions of unfreedom, to bondage, oppression, and tyranny. One might presume that these affects would be found in the vicinity of resistance, expressions of a longing for freedom, cracks in the fabric of dominance, or energies that fuel fights for liberation. Here, notable affiliations lie less with Arendt and other centrist political thinkers but rather with the likes of Frantz Fanon, Assata Shakur, Audre Lorde and others engaged in an uncompromising struggle against oppression.

Affects in politics: Affective governance – affective resistance

As we have seen, Spinoza suggests that even if political action is ultimately aimed at and might even depend on some kind of freedom, it can rarely, if at all, be realized. Investigating this dilemma of freedom in unfreedom is a major task of politics. It is one of Foucault's (1982) central theoretical insights that political subjects are always-already governed, and resistance and governance are inextricably linked. Thus, an orientation towards freedom is inextricably linked to dialectical relations of power. In Foucault's (esp. 1984) work, the cultivation of affect plays a major role in governance and resistance. With his convincing co-reading of the two authors, Rainer Mühlhoff (2018) has shown how the production and governing of subjectivity as described by Foucault are largely compatible with a Spinozian notion of affect.

The creation of political subjects, be they individual or collective, is not conceivable without processes of affective attachment, whether to a system of governance, a political cause, a group, or to individual peers or comrades (→ *attachment*). To maintain organizational political arrangements, affective dynamics are crucial, both to mobilize members and to enforce compliance with rules. At base, such processes are comparable when it comes to the state itself governing its citizens or to a group of dissidents resisting the state. The wielding of power, either in order to govern or to resist, is fundamentally an affective process. Insofar as politics is about the creation, maintenance and use of power, political actors understand the relevance of the creation of relatively stable affective dynamics to further political projects, both as a target for destabilization when it comes to their political opponents, as well as a goal to achieve for themselves.

It is therefore not surprising that much work on affective dynamics and the political has dealt with the production of emotion and sentiment (→ *emotion, emotion concept; → sentiment*). Emotions such as love for god or country, hatred for the enemy in war or class struggle, anxiety of foreigners or social disenfranchisement, enthusiasm for economic advancement or legal equality are powerful and culturally scripted devices for "doing politics". Beyond the evocation, production, and maintenance of political emotions (cf. Nussbaum, 2013), politics also aim at creating sentiments – relatively stable regimes of meaning embedded into affective and emotional dynamics. Being for or against something, assessing an action as right or wrong, finding an outcome just or unjust – these are all processes that play out in the context of the creation, mobilization, and transformation of sentiments. Seemingly different, even contradictory notions such as racism, social equality, gender stereotypes, class struggle, warmongering, peacemaking, law and order, liberal values, or conservatism come to the fore not as abstract rational concepts, but as sentiments. Being able to skillfully navigate, govern or transform sentiments is accordingly a powerful political capacity.

In the study of affect and the political, authors have tended – sometimes based on a Massumian (1995) notion of an all-too strict differentiation between affect and emotion – to emphasize the role of affect

in processes of resistance and transformation, while taking emotion and sentiment to be prevalent in processes of governing and stabilization.⁴ We are weary of such distinctions and make a plea for systematically investigating the role of affect, emotion and sentiment in all kinds of political processes, including governance and resistance, stabilization and destabilization, revolution and reaction. Kyla Schuller (2018) has given an impressive account of 19th century biopolitics and the decisive – and highly problematic – role of feeling and sentiment as means of governance, bringing forth the notion of “sentimental biopower”. She uses this concept to highlight the extent to which affectivity was – and still is – a discursive device for establishing and cementing hierarchies of race and gender. With regard to affective resistance, on the other hand, Hardt and Negri (2004) see affective dynamics as the birthplace of a new form of political subject, the global multitude, which can be the agent of fundamental and radical change against the capitalist world economy. Based on a similar notion, Mouffe (2000) highlights the role of the mobilization of passions for bringing the political, in the form of agonistic struggle, to the fore and forming the basis for leftist resistance against neoliberal policies.

One field of inquiry in which the role of affect, emotion and sentiment has been especially highlighted is the workings of colonial governance. In such works, many refer to Fanon (1952/2008) as a scholar of colonial affectivity (e.g., Ahmed, 2007). Fanon shows how racist colonial governance is affectively inscribed into the self of the colonized (→ *affects of racialization*). At the same time, he indicates that anti-colonial resistance must also aim at the modulation of feeling and sentiment to free the governed from colonial power. Ann Stoler’s work (e.g., 2007), largely based on Foucault and on feminist readings of his texts, has skillfully demonstrated how colonial governance aimed at the cultivation of specific sentiments and the crafting of emotional dispositions. In her work on Dutch colonial policies of education and child rearing in the Dutch Indies (today’s Indonesia) in the 19th and early 20th century, Stoler (2002) carves out a practice of governance she calls “sentimental education” (pp. 112-139). From the thorough investigation of colonial records, Stoler (2002) maps out “the moral landscape of a racializing and reformist colonial regime for whom child rearing and affective attachments were defining features and affairs of state” and describes what was at issue, namely the “learning of place and race” (p. 112). It was by learning certain sentiments and sensibilities that young citizens in the colonies were granted the right to be treated as European; a right that was denied to others. Stoler shows how the concern with nurturing specific affects and sentiments was not limited to the colonial peripheries, but also began to dominate the European motherland. Her work demonstrates that the colonial state’s concerns for feelings of belonging and affective attachments were not metaphors for something else, but key conduits of power themselves. As such, the harnessing of sentiment and the making of communities of sentiment was a crucial site of political contest. Stoler

⁴ Bargetz and Sauer (2015) argue that this has led to a trend of overestimating the positive effects of affect while downplaying its negative outcomes. On this matter, we basically agree with them and would also stress the political ambivalence of affect.

(2009, pp. 73-102) also describes a protest from 1848 in Batavia, the Javanese capital of the Dutch East Indies, which was likewise directed at educational policy – namely the rule that only those youths schooled in the Netherlands would be eligible for the colony’s most coveted civil service posts. This education in the “motherland” should culturally cultivate bureaucratic selves governed by “self-denial, diligence, temperance and self-control” (Stoler, 2009, p. 65). The protesters were contesting the strain this policy laid on their affective attachments to their sons, when they had to ship them off to The Hague for years. For the governing colonialists such “parental sentiments and the sorrow of a father’s heart now looked more like ‘political’ issues and concerns of state” (Stoler, 2009, p. 83).

Along similar lines of thinking, a number of entries in this volume have highlighted the role of feeling, affect, emotion, and sentiment for political processes of governance and resistance. One crucial technique of governance is immersive power, a term which describes the multifarious techniques of immersing people in affective arrangements to form them as subjects and selves, harness their energies and potentials for the purposes of a larger apparatus such as a party, a movement, or a company, and to evoke thoroughgoing compliance (→ *immersive power*). One form of affective governance is the production of a racialized regime of othering and inequality, described by the concept of racialized affect (→ *affects of racialization*). In line with the idea of affective subjectivation is the claim that affect plays a key role in the formation of collective subjects and communities (→ *affective communities*). The citizenry is a specific community of political subjects brought about by the state whose inner workings can be fruitfully investigated through the lens of affect; citizenship is far from a formal, criteria-based mode of allegiance but a thoroughly affective affair (→ *affective citizenship*). Practices of resistance, such as dissident practices of image-making and image-distribution in political protests are likewise rendered meaningful by way of affective dynamics (→ *affective witnessing*). Political protest can open up affective possibilities and create potentialities to imagine and even produce new political futures (→ *Midān moments*).

Outlook

We have proposed using “political affect” as an analytic notion that helps to render visible the multifaceted involvement of affect in efforts of governance and in the manifold reactions and resistances these efforts encounter. Cultivating affect is a force to create new potentialities and possibilities, but the crafting of specific affective dynamics is also a successful technique of governance and creating compliance. Investigating affect in the myriad of practices that unfold in this constant dynamic of governing and resisting significantly broadens investigations of politics beyond reductionist characterizations, such as those that see politics as a game of negotiating purportedly rational political interests, with the occasional application of physical violence. Political affect is an analytical perspective that lets us look more closely into the fine-grained intricacies of political

interaction that all too often shift out of focus: the intimate, the everyday, that which is only possible, yet not realized, and how these are entangled with the public, the extraordinary, and the real. Political affect asks most broadly and curiously “what matters?” (Lutz, 2017) – and does not know the answer in advance.

Besides this practical and analytical orientation towards concrete politics, we have taken the political thought of Spinoza as an exemplary articulation of a deeper theoretical involvement of affect with “the political”. While thoroughly realistic and empirically oriented, Spinoza’s reflections on the dynamic constitution of political bodies do more than analyze the affective workings of extant political formations. Over and above such forays into the *Realpolitik* of his day, Spinoza inspires foundational reflections on the philosophical connection between affect and the political as such. In particular, his thoughts on the ultimate “point” of politics, namely, a social form of freedom as joyously enacted collective action, suggests an elaboration of the concept of the political as deeply involving affect. Spinoza – at least on the feminist reading of his works we espouse – outlines an orientation towards a radically democratic polity in which individuals realize their potential through the forming of affective alliances, thereby creating a collective life grounded in understanding and solidarity. While this is an exemplary vision of the political that not everyone will share, it orients us towards inquiring into the upshot or the “point” of the political as such. Other answers are conceivable here. Some, for instance, will reckon with a much more antagonistic political landscape, where the road to human freedom leads through a thoroughly contested territory and via the conflicting orientations and demands of multiple groups and collectives – a Schmittian vision of politics as struggle, in which the paramount political affects would have to be sought in the vicinity of conflict, war, or general antagonism (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Again, others will take a stance against such an ultimately “bellicose” orientation and instead posit the necessity of tying a notion of the political to an ethical perspective, which likewise invites articulation in affective terms. Authors drawing on the work of Levinas and Derrida have associated the political with an “infinite” ethical demand issued by the Other. Butler (2004) and Critchley (2008), for example, straightforwardly tie such a line of thought to considerations of constitutive affective relations to alterity. On these grounds, Critchley explicitly invokes an “ethical politics” (2008, p. 205) – a notion that is near inconceivable to proponents of an antagonistic understanding of the political.

The more general message we take from these conflicting accounts is that “political affect” in all these proposals works as a philosophical notion that inspires assessments and problematizations of the political as such. Understood in this way, the concept of political affect does not invoke a definitive articulation of the meaning of politics, but rather works as a means for reflection on the nature of the political (*Reflexionsbegriff*). It points in a certain direction – for instance, to collectivity, antagonism, justice or freedom – but without delineating a direct path to a single, unambiguous answer. This

entails an orientation within a given political situation that transcends the merely factual and moves towards a sense of possibility. The political is the sphere where human individuals and collectives determine – either jointly or adversely – what their finite earthly existence will ultimately look like: the *how* of their living together and relating to one another. A truly political affect in this sense will be one that begins from an awareness (or mere hunch) that, within human affairs, change is possible at any time.

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