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INSTITUTIONAL AFFECT

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Institutions are rich sites of affect. From schools to hospitals to law courts, the many institutions that organize collective life emerge from affective attachments, relations, and tensions of various kinds. Institutions mediate affects and are maintained by them; they are also, sometimes, undone by them. In capturing the place of institutions in complex relations of affecting and being-affected, *institutional affect* offers a critical inroad to understanding institutional life. This concept highlights the interconnection between how institutions are imagined, the physical manifestations of institutions, and how people feel and act in relation to them. Among other things, *institutional affect* helps to explain how institutions exert power without direct enforcement: as, for instance, when first-generation academics experience shame for standing out in their everyday participation in the university. This conceptual lens also allows explaining pathways of institutional change, and why it is that some institutions shift in certain directions over others (consider the German car industry's sluggish transition to ecological sustainability, compared to its swift pivot to weapons production). Moreover, *institutional affect* helps to account for how and why some institutions—for example, the heteronormative family unit—persist, despite clear evidence of their structural violence.

Traditional approaches to institutions have focused mainly on the indispensable rules that structure human societies (Giddens, 1984; Douglas, 1986; North, 1990). Our account builds on this work but also takes into account newer approaches that emphasize the role of symbolism, affect, and embodiment in mediating processes of institutional change (e.g., Patalano, 2007; Puwar, 2014; Seyfert, 2011; Waylen, 2010). Within this field of research, generally speaking, there is a lack of sustained attention to how affect, embodiment, and material arrangements link up with imagination and wider social imaginaries (see Celermajer et al., 2019 for further discussion). *Institutional affect* shows how all of these elements intersect with one another, and are deeply consequential for patterns of institutional discrimination, exclusion, reform, and resilience.

Our framework captures and analyses affective arrangements (Slaby et al., 2019) that emerge from three intersecting dimensions of institutional life: materialities, actors, and imaginaries. Materialities include institutional spaces, architectures, objects, and technologies.

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By actors we mean differently embodied individuals who occupy particular institutional roles or positionings. Imaginaries comprise the stock of guiding images, symbols, narratives, and other significations that permeate a particular institution and which intersect with broader social imaginaries. In their interplay, these dimensions enable, structure, and channel the affective life of institutions (Churcher et al., 2023). *Institutional affect* homes in on the affective ecologies that are bound up with these overlapping dimensions and with asymmetries of power that exist within and echo through institutions.

Institutional affect offers a framework for understanding both institutional stability and rupture. In the following discussion, we draw on the examples of Gisèle Pelicot's sexual assault trial and the authoritarian takeover currently unfolding within the United States to illustrate how the nexus of imaginaries, materialities, and actors factors into the resilience of institutions as well as their transformation.

The Second Life of Institutions

While institutions can be many things, the concept of *institutional affect* primarily concerns itself with institutions that have emerged with modern statehood and which have become solidified in durable material-semiotic structures.[1] Legal institutions, medical institutions, and institutions of education comprise just a few examples of powerful institutions that organize contemporary forms of social and political life through their capacity to harness, generate, and mediate collective imaginings and affective dynamics (Castoriadis, 1975/1987, p. 132). While such institutions play an indispensable role in distributing vital social goods and services, and in implementing rules that help to ensure social order and stability (see, e.g., Desjarlais, 1997; Biehl, 2013; Livingston, 2012; Zoanni, 2019), they can also reflect and work to reinforce dominant societal power structures—in a manner that belies their declared commitments to fairness, equality, and the common good. Consider, for instance, the ordeals that migrants face in their interactions with the legal system (Stumpfoegger et al., 2023); the discrimination that ethnic and racial minorities confront in educational or medical institutions (Shange, 2019; Ewing, 2025; → *Sensory Care*); and the differential treatment that socio-economically disadvantaged persons experience in policing, housing, or state bureaucracy (Guenther, 2019; Puwar, 2004). It is for this reason that established institutions and their "hidden lives" (Chappell & Waylen, 2013; Krook & Mackay, 2011) have long been the focus of emancipatory critiques of domination (Boltanski, 2011).

Institutional settings that have historically evolved to reflect and serve the perspectives, values, and interests of powerful social actors at the expense of others can be a parcourse of humiliation, nuisance, and obstruction for the latter, while offering a comfortable dwelling space for the former (Ahmed, 2007, 2012). *Institutional affect* helps to reveal what we call the "second life" of institutions. This life is marked by informal, pervasive, and normalized practices that run counter to an institution's official mission and to which institutional actors and addressees are habituated. Homing in on this second life focuses attention on the lived realities of institutional double standards, and on the affective workings of power and domination beyond the scope of formal institutional rules: invisible divisions and barriers, atmospheric thresholds, unspoken agreements, and many other shades of organized inequality.

Institutional procedures that are marked by hidden dynamics of power rely on the operation of institutional affect for their maintenance and concealment (Churcher et al., 2023;

von Scheve & Slaby, 2022). For instance, when institutions and their representatives are consistently portrayed in a positive light, this can serve to deny or obscure patterns of institutional bias and wrongdoing. As a result, those who call out injustice may be pathologized or discredited (Ahmed, 2012). Institutional betrayal and gaslighting of this kind can further compound emotions like anger, mistrust, and alienation among those who fail to be served by the institution in question. The cumulative effects of these exclusionary or discriminatory procedures can be significant, as the following discussion elucidates (see also Protevi, 2022).

The Law and Its Affects

The institution of law offers a clear illustration of institutional affect and its bearing on power relations of various kinds. Law, as an institution, cannot be reduced to a functional, coercive entity that lays down legislative rules and directives; rather, it is a rich site of symbolism. Law comprises a "guiding idea" (Hauriou, 1929/1965) or professed mission—for instance, the pursuit and enforcement of justice, to name one plausible articulation.[2] The law also involves an array of addressees and role-bearers (e.g., the judiciary, the police, jurors, lawyers) who are expected to adhere to a particular set of policies and practices in realization of the law's guiding idea. Moreover, enacting the law and its guiding idea relies on various material infrastructures and facilities (e.g., legal documents, courtrooms).

A cluster of evocative metaphors, images, and symbols construct the law as an impartial, benevolent, transcendent institution and the ultimate source of truth and fairness: witness, in Western culture, the embodiment of the law in the figure of Themis—the Greek goddess of justice, wisdom, and divine law—blindfolded and holding a set of balanced scales. Such significations appeal directly to the imagination and work alongside other embedded narratives and images to invite a strong sense of reverence for legal conclusions and the social understandings these conclusions embed. At the same time, this institutional imaginary obfuscates the partial and particularized character of Western law, which has historically evolved to reflect and serve the imaginings, desires, and interests of elite White men. Critical race theorists, for instance, have highlighted the limitations of the law as an instrument for supporting slavery reparations, when it was originally designed to protect, and can still readily be invoked to preserve, the property of privileged White constituencies (see Harris, 1993; Bhandar, 2018; von Redecker, 2020; da Silva, 2022). Under colonial rule, European law travelled across the globe: a facilitator of colonialism, it was wielded to extract land from colonized people and turn them into a force of wage laborers. At the same time, however, this body of law also provided tools for the colonized to resist and challenge the colonial order (Merry, 1991; → *Property as Affect*).

Those with a non-masculine, non-White embodiment tend to occupy a vexed or at least ambiguous place in relation to legal frameworks, norms, and settings. A powerful strand of feminist scholarship has focused on the systemic disadvantages suffered by female survivors of sexual assault under Western legal systems (Manne, 2018; Alcoff, 2019; Craig, 2021). The legal system's strong and uncritical reliance on consistency as a common test of credibility in sexual assault trials offers a case in point: demonstrated inconsistencies in one's statements, in one's post-assault behavior, and in one's recollection of details peripheral to the assault itself could readily sow feelings of distrust among jurors and discredit plaintiffs. Yet a high level of consistency is difficult to satisfy for those with experiences of significant trauma, insofar as such experiences tend to burden one's mental capacities; moreover, being

perceived as consistent is difficult for those whose group identity is already constructed as lacking moral-epistemic credibility within the broader social imaginary of a culture (Alcoff, 2019). Applying the lens of *institutional affect* to such cases reveals how institutional standards and norms interact with broader cultural imaginaries to generate affective dynamics that disadvantage those who have been excluded from processes of institutional evolution. At the same time, institutional imaginaries can obscure these exclusions, making them harder to recognize or challenge.

Institutional norms and procedures that serve to regulate affective dynamics among embodied actors in courtroom trials are often supported by architectural elements, objects, technologies, spatial layouts, rituals, and a host of other material arrangements (Bens, 2018, 2022; Carline et al., 2024; Mulchahy, 2011; Mulchahy & Rowden, 2019). Participants in the courtroom stand up to signify respect for the judge, and this deferential relation is reinforced by the judge's seated elevation above the gallery. Those actors charged with the burden of proof—the witness and prosecution—are positioned closest to the jury, and those giving testimony must sit isolated in the witness stand opposite members of the gallery. In many courtroom layouts, the accused is seated in close physical proximity to the plaintiff. This material layout and the power relations it indexes can not only trigger the plaintiff's trauma (Ellison & Munro, 2017) but also elicit a sense of being under intense scrutiny and judgment. Set against a dominant cultural imaginary that positions women as *prima facie* untrustworthy and prone to misjudgment, the affective arrangement of the courtroom can readily activate stereotype threat and a cramping of the plaintiff's agentive powers. This dynamic can be consequential for women and their capacity to seek justice, especially given the normative assumption in courtroom trials that one's credibility as a testifier can be gleaned from their embodied, in-court performance (Watson & Schreiber, 2021; Konradi, 1996, 1999; Orth, 2002), and where nervousness, faltering, or silence is associated with untrustworthiness. Adversarial and aggressive postures that are commonly adopted by members of the legal defense can further serve to cramp the plaintiff's testimonial powers, thereby assisting to skew trial outcomes in favor of defendants (Bell, 2007; Orth, 2002; Koss, 2000).

Institutional affect highlights how the interplay of imaginaries, materialities, and embodied actors within established institutions can serve to produce outcomes that run up against an institution's explicit ideals and self-image. At the same time, this conceptual framework enables a greater understanding of how institutional change and equity is brought about. Attending to the close union between imagination, affect, and material arrangements reveals how the affective experiences of those who are disadvantaged within institutional settings can, when collectivized, encourage the articulation of counter-imaginaries and new material arrangements. Alternative material arrangements, in turn, open up new affective possibilities with the potential to usher in further re-imaginings and their material supports.

When video testimony, physical partitions, and remote testimony were made possible for survivors of assault thanks to sustained pressure from activists, these material reforms embedded counter-imaginings of truth-eliciting conditions and commitments to care that opened up new ways of thinking, feeling, and being in the courtroom. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck and courtroom procedures shifted online, survivors could speak from the comfort of their homes and at a distance from the alienating and austere atmosphere of the courtroom, to significant effect (see, e.g., Watson & Schreiber, 2021). However, even

progressive institutional reforms can have unintended and undesirable effects: hiding victims of sexual assault behind partitions, for instance, can unwittingly serve to reinforce culturally embedded images of rape survivors as bearing shame. The pervasiveness of this cultural imaginary explains why Gisèle Pelicot's[3] recent insistence on a public trial and having footage of her rapes played to the courtroom—in an effort to lay shame squarely on her rapists—served as a breaking frame moment: one that lays the ground for further social and institutional change. Through spotlighting the uneven and unanticipated effects of shifting institutional materialities, *institutional affect* highlights the imperative for reforms to consider a plurality of embodied perspectives and needs, and to remain open to ongoing contestation and revision from those actors most affected by them.

While new technologies and changes to traditional material arrangements can embolden some and disempower others, they can also incite resistance among those who are served by them—especially those whose embodiment and whose powers these arrangements have evolved to serve. Judges who are accustomed to being shown respect and deference, and who enjoy control over courtroom proceedings and actors, for instance, are unlikely to be wholly welcoming of material reforms that challenge these affective and material privileges. Indeed, among those who tend to be advantaged by and who sit comfortably within institutional arrangements, investments of faith and trust in the institutional *status quo* are likely to be common. When set against imaginings of long-standing institutions as transcendent, neutral structures as opposed to constructed and contingent, calls for institutional reform or abolition are likely to attract visceral reactions of puzzlement, anger, resentment, and defensiveness. Such reactions serve, in many instances, to stymie action from being taken. The possibility and longevity of institutional shifts will thus depend, at least in part, on exposing, undoing, and refiguring the affective commitments and investments of institutional actors.

Echoes of the Dual State

In view of the current turn to right-wing illiberal populism in many countries across the globe, and in some staple late-modern mass democracies like the United States in particular, it is worthwhile to consider institutional affect on a broader plane. It has often been noted, and has become increasingly evident of late, that an authoritarian takeover may not necessarily come from outside established democratic institutions, but might spring up *within* the institutional landscape of a democracy on the brink (Snyder, 2017; Toscano, 2023).

Facets of an authoritarian turn from within the democratic nation state, driven by powerful (and empowered) actors, can be witnessed when the legal system appoints partisan actors and conducts campaigns against representatives of rivalling political factions; when law enforcement and security apparatuses use their power to enact racist policies to criminalize and intimidate certain populations; and when the state censors elected officials, journalists, or educators. What is striking is the ready adherence of many institutional actors to counter-legal measures, and how readily anti-democratic forces can spring up within the institutional infrastructure of late liberal societies, and harness this infrastructure for illiberal ends.

In the wake of an authoritarian takeover, what we call the "second life" of institutions overtakes the first life: authoritarian measures, double standards, partisan allegiance, and unconstitutional practices become the norm, and are performed openly by emboldened

actors who no longer see the need to mask their counter-legal actions. Such a shift usually unfolds amid a manufactured sense of emergency or crisis: in frantic response to presumed "attacks on the system" from terrorist elements, criminal migrants, or traitors to the national cause. The mobilization of this imaginary serves to engender an affective atmosphere of insecurity, threat, and looming disaster, which can serve to encourage support for further authoritarian incursions in the name of enhanced security and order (see Seymour, 2024).

A theoretically potent notion of *institutional affect* offers insight into the set of enabling conditions for democratic structures to be dismantled, in plain sight, and often with public support. In the U.S. context, these conditions comprise a complex cluster of imaginaries, material infrastructures, and differently embodied actors with overlapping experiences, interests, and attachments. Enduring narratives of American exceptionalism and the "American Dream"; the continuing sedimentation of colonial-capitalist imaginings in legal and security apparatuses; and rising inequality and institutional exploitation under the weight of pervasive neoliberal imaginaries each comprise forces that have intersected to generate a blend of resentment, wounded pride, fear, and anxiety that is shared across different locations.

Against the backdrop of institutional violence, neglect, and betrayal that is both patterned and systematic, it is not surprising that political campaigns leading on a promise of institutional upheaval should gain a foothold. Under such conditions, affectively mobilizing idioms that embed false promises of prosperity through "draining the swamp" and taking a "chainsaw to bureaucracy" can prove compelling. Counter-legal measures framed as necessary to instantiate those visions—including state-led efforts to censor elected officials, journalists, and educators; unconstitutional forms of discrimination; and the dismissal of legal verdicts by the executive branch—may be perceived as entirely welcome and legitimate. This is especially the case in a context where affective disinvestment in liberal democratic institutions has become pronounced, and where the law itself has become a target of collective ridicule (the brandishing of "I voted for the felon" merchandise among Trump supporters offers one case in point).

The material outcome of this authoritarian turn from within a liberal democracy can be two separate states operating alongside one another, as Ernst Fraenkel noted in relation to Nazi Germany in his 1941 study *The Dual State* (Fraenkel, 1941/2017): one state bound by the laws, regulations, and administrative norms of legal-rational bureaucracy ("the normative state"), and another state that is openly authoritarian, driven by executive measures in response to a putative emergency, and unbound by the constraints of legality ("the prerogative state"). That it even begins to make sense to invoke Fraenkel's theory of the Nazi state in relation to today's embattled late-liberal state apparatuses is a grim reminder of where we stand in 2025.

Outlook

In zooming in on the lived experiences and shared imaginings of an array of institutional actors and addressees, and how these experiences and imaginings are mediated by clusters of interpenetrating institutions (e.g., institutions of law, education, media, healthcare), *institutional affect* offers a valuable framework for understanding the uneven effects that institutions have on different actors, and how and why institutions shift in particular directions and not in others. Yet this framework not only serves a diagnostic function; it also

furnishes a blueprint for action. In spotlighting subtle dynamics of power that unfold in and through institutions, *institutional affect* can guide collective efforts to re-imagine and re-design institutions, while also drawing attention to the inherently unpredictable outcomes of such efforts. Moreover, in treating imaginaries as temporally extended as well as materially embedded, embodied, and localized phenomena, *institutional affect* highlights the limitations of a one-size-fits-all approach to institutional preservation or reform, and foregrounds the practical importance of context-sensitive interventions. Indeed, counter-imaginings that take root and serve to prompt institutional shifts in one socio-historical context may fail to do so in another. Oftentimes, the uptake of alternative visions will depend on their resonance with existing, local imaginaries and strong affective investments therein (see Churcher, 2023; Richardson-Self, 2021).

In framing institutions as localized affective arrangements in which imaginaries, actors, and materialities dynamically interact, *institutional affect* opens up new critical perspectives and lines of inquiry to examine institutional power. Among other things, it expands an understanding of the obstacles to, and opportunities for, institutional transformation, as well as what is at stake, and for whom, when institutions shift or remain intact.

Notes

1 While the examples of institutions on which we draw in this chapter originate mostly in Europe and thus refer to settings defined by modern liberal statehood, the reach of this notion is by no means constrained to these settings alone. Rather, we assume that institutional affect will offer a productive angle anywhere where institutions have sedimented into material environments and are able to exert significant authority over the flow of public life, including in illiberal and authoritarian contexts. Moreover, at this political moment, the question of what defines a modern liberal institution in countries like Germany, Austria, France, and the United States is very much a live one.
2 Guiding ideas are contested and prone to change. Institutional actors might entertain and enact conflicting ideas about what the core purpose of the institution is, causing internal frictions. This is particularly evident in medical and educational institutions where there are often rifts between those who hold mission-orientated visions of medical care and of teaching and research, and those who hold more profit-orientated visions.
3 In 2024, Pelicot's husband, Dominique Pelicot, was found guilty of drugging her and for inviting at least 80 men to rape her with him while she was unconscious. Gisèle Pelicot waived her right to have the trial held behind closed doors, insisting that "it's not for us [rape survivors] to have shame—it's for them" (Chrisafis, 2024). On the case and the trial, see also Garcia (2025).

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