

THE NEW KEY CONCEPTS IN AFFECTIVE SOCIETIES

This volume offers a comprehensive rethinking of how affect and emotion shape contemporary social and political life. Against the backdrop of global crises, polarized publics, and media-saturated environments, this book positions affect not as a mere supplement to reason or discourse, but as the connective tissue between self and society, the intimate and the institutional.

Drawing on over a decade of interdisciplinary research at the Berlin-based Collaborative Research Center *Affective Societies*, the contributors develop a rich conceptual toolbox to understand the affective dynamics at play in governance, media, care, protest, and everyday life. From affective polarization and outrage politics to infrastructures of feeling and institutional affect, this collection identifies new key concepts that serve as both diagnostic tools and theoretical interventions.

Bridging affect theory with empirical inquiry, it demonstrates how affect and emotion are central to how we relate, resist, dwell, and imagine. This is a carefully curated volume that will appeal to scholars and students interested in the affective and emotional foundations of contemporary societies from a range of fields: sociology, cultural studies, psycho-social studies, anthropology, political science, media studies, religious and theological studies, philosophy, and performance studies.

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Routledge Studies in Affective Societies

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Routledge Studies in Affective Societies presents high-level academic work on the social dimensions of human affectivity. It aims to shape, consolidate and promote a new understanding of societies as Affective Societies, accounting for the fundamental importance of affect and emotion for human coexistence in the mobile and networked worlds of the twenty-first century. Contributions come from a wide range of academic fields, including anthropology, sociology, cultural, media and film studies, political science, performance studies, art history, philosophy, and social, developmental and cultural psychology. Contributing authors share the vision of a transdisciplinary understanding of the affective dynamics of human sociality. Thus, *Routledge Studies in Affective Societies* devotes considerable space to the development of methodology, research methods and techniques that are capable of uniting perspectives and practices from different fields.

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The New Key Concepts in Affective Societies

*Edited by Jan Slaby, Christian von Scheve, Tamar Blickstein,
and Polina Aronson*

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>List of Contributors</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xvi</i>
<i>Funding Note</i>	<i>xviii</i>
1 Affect and Emotion: Social Theory for the 21st Century <i>Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve</i>	1
PART I	
Governance, Reflexivity, Contestation	25
2 Emotional Reflexivity <i>Elgen Sauerborn</i>	27
3 Contested Emotions <i>Christian von Scheve</i>	35
4 Emotional Politics <i>Jonas Harbke, Simon Koschut, Julia Mehlmann, and Gabriela Pancheva</i>	45
5 Outrage Politics <i>Michal Givoni</i>	54
6 Affective Mobilization <i>Jonas Harbke, Julia Mehlmann, Max Müller, Maren Wirth, Hansjörg Dilger, Simon Koschut, Margreth Lünenborg, and Dominik Mattes</i>	63

7	Reading Relations <i>Gesa Jessen</i>	72
 PART II		
	Senses, Belonging, Care	81
8	Olfactory Affect <i>Ilke İmer, Claudia Liebelt, and Mayıs Tokel</i>	83
9	Sensory Care <i>Max Müller, Luisa Eilinghoff, Anita von Poser, Edda Willamowski, Eric Hahn, and Thi Minh Tam Ta</i>	92
10	Affective Treatment <i>Taoyi Yang</i>	100
11	Home Feelings <i>Gregory Gan</i>	110
 PART III		
	Institutions, Economy, Media	119
12	Institutional Affect <i>Millicent Churcher, Sandra Calkins, Jandra Böttger, and Jan Slaby</i>	121
13	Property as Affect <i>Jonas Bens</i>	130
14	Market Affects <i>Markus Lange</i>	139
15	Affective Media <i>Bernd Bösel</i>	149
16	Infrastructures of Feeling <i>Ana Makhashvili and Margreth Lünenborg</i>	159
17	Affective Archive <i>Kerstin Schankweiler</i>	168

PART IV

Echoes, Hauntings, Prefigurations 177

- 18 Affective Contemporaneity 179
Anne Fleig and Matthias Warstat
- 19 Haunting 187
Fabian Bernhardt
- 20 Prefigurative Aesthetics 196
Theresa Schütz and Doris Kolesch
- 21 Colonialism as Affect 205
Paola Ivanov and Laibor Kalanga Moko

PART V

Friction, Stasis, Suppression 215

- 22 Affective Engagements 217
Hansjörg Dilger, Maren Wirth, and Kristina Mashimi
- 23 Affects of Critique 226
Aletta Diefenbach, Matthias Lüthjohann, and Hans Roth
- 24 Affective Stasis 236
Fabian Bernhardt
- 25 Unfeeling 245
Henrike Kohpeiß

PART VI

Perspectives 255

- 26 Affect as Method: Against the Numb View of Embodiment 257
Donovan O. Schaefer
- 27 Studying (Neo-)Emotion Practices in Affect and Emotion Research 270
Marci D. Cottingham
- 28 *Qadma'*: Ecology and the Ends of Affect 281
Tamar Blickstein
- Index* 292

FIGURES

17.1 Arkadi Zaides: Archive (2014)/© Christophe Raynaud de Lage

174

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PREFACE

To embark on the journey of editing a second, entirely new volume showcasing the *Key Concepts* of almost 12 years of research on affect and emotion at Freie Universität Berlin (and elsewhere) has been an endeavor as obvious as it has been challenging. It has been obvious because the feedback we obtained on the first volume, published in 2019, has been overwhelmingly positive. We have received comments from researchers across the globe and from various disciplines who were enthusiastic about the volume, telling us how the concepts assembled therein inspired their own theoretical and empirical research. Embarking on this journey has also been obvious because the research that has been carried out at the *Affective Societies* center since the publication of the first volume has produced a broad range of new and groundbreaking concepts that deserve to be published in a carefully curated, consolidated, and interconnected manner to reach a wide and interdisciplinary audience. And a third reason why this journey has been obvious to us is that the world has changed at an unprecedented pace since 2019, plagued by various crises and disruptions: the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian war against Ukraine, subsequent economic disruptions and global inflation, Israel's Gaza campaign, the political and economic turmoil and cultural regressions following the re-election of Donald J. Trump, the continuing rise and acceptance of authoritarianism and the retreat of liberal principles, and, of course, the ever mounting consequences of climate change. These crises and disruptions constitute major attacks on societies' social, political, and moral orders and ways of life. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that the world is fundamentally not the same anymore as it was in 2019. These are not only changes to and disruptions of the social and ideological, but likewise of the affective and emotional fabrics of society. And affect and emotion are increasingly marshaled to bring about—or to defer—these changes. *The New Key Concepts in Affective Societies* will help to better understand these developments.

The endeavor of editing *The New Key Concepts* has been challenging because it is not your usual edited volume. All the chapters follow a carefully developed format and style, one that we successfully implemented already in the first volume. Stylistically, the entries sit halfway between encyclopedic entries and research chapters in the humanities or the social sciences. Editing for compliance and clarity, therefore, takes more time and effort than it

does in a more traditional edited volume. Since the entries are significantly shorter than a typical chapter, we were able to include 28 of them, which is a challenge not only from the viewpoint of stylistic editing, but also in terms of composing and arranging the book. Given these challenges, the editorial team that had consisted of Jan Slaby and Christian von Scheve in the first volume was expanded for the present volume to include Polina Aronson and Tamar Blickstein, whose contributions—from unparalleled editorial skills to fresh perspectives on the field—significantly shaped this book. We are grateful for the collaborative spirit that energized this volume.

This project would have been impossible to realize without the dedication of all our contributing authors, their willingness to engage with the somewhat unusual format of the chapters, the trust they put into the entire project and us as editors, and, most importantly, their endurance and sense of compliance when confronted with our nitty gritty comments and requests for revisions, more often than not communicated in a state of heightened affect. We also wish to thank the editorial team at Routledge for their continued and enthusiastic support they already showed for the first installment of the *Key Concepts*, in particular Emily Briggs and Lakshita Joshi. Most importantly, however, we wish to thank Paul Nicolas Möller, our editorial assistant at the *Affective Societies* center. Paul managed the entire editorial process, monitoring the chapter pipeline from submissions of initial drafts to final copy editing, handling most of the communications with our contributing authors, assigning tasks to the editorial team, keeping an eye on deadlines, and on countless to-do lists. Thank you, Paul! Without your hard work, dedication, and attention to detail, this would not have been possible.

Countless others helped us with their expertise and energy throughout the editing process. Sam Nimmrichter provided valuable editorial assistance on several chapters, chiming in with poignant advice on content and crafty recommendations on style. Valuable last-ditch feedback on the Introduction was provided by Susanna Li and especially Michal Givoni, who sacrificed parts of a sunny weekend to engage with our material. Already throughout the process, Michal supported us at various points with her straight-shooting assessments. Jandra Böttger and Henrike Kohpeiß read earlier versions of the Introduction and kept our writing on track with their careful reading impressions.

We heartily thank the fantastic office crew at the CRC *Affective Societies*, spearheaded by the tireless Franziska Lesak and diligent Markus Lange, for their assistance throughout. We also thank the Members of Governing Board of the CRC *Affective Societies* for their trust and support, and notably the initiative's speaker, Hansjörg Dilger, and co-speaker, Doris Kolesch, whose collegial leadership is key for fostering the unique working atmosphere at our center, marked by enthusiasm and camaraderie.

On a final note, we would like to dedicate this volume to Birgitt Röttger-Rössler, now retired, but still one of the series editors of the *Routledge Studies in Affective Societies*. Birgitt has been the heart and soul of the *Affective Societies* Center from 2015 until 2022, from the very beginning to the end of the second funding round. Without you, Birgitt, all this would not have happened, thank you!

Berlin, July 2025
The Editors

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1

AFFECT AND EMOTION: SOCIAL THEORY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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In this opening chapter to *The New Key Concepts in Affective Societies*, we position affect and emotion as guiding concepts for a social theory that seeks to better understand social and political life at the current juncture, a quarter of the way through the 21st century. At the time of writing in mid-2025, wars and conflicts, ecological and political crises, are shaking up the world, sending shock waves through societies and putting people and institutions under duress. A new era of power-politics, often in disregard of international law, contests the Western liberal order. At least nominally, this order had been committed to peaceful coexistence, human rights, and a striving for progress through collaboration. In view of new wars, violence, displacement, extractivism, and ecological devastation—and blatant breaches of the written and unwritten rules of international coexistence—this order is sharply deteriorating.

This volume starts from the assumption that affect and emotion, especially as amplified and modulated through new media, play a central role in the regressive developments that mark our times. In the political sphere, it would be difficult to make sense of the rise of authoritarian populism and new styles of political contestation without giving weight to their emotionalizing and affectively polarizing qualities. This affective polarization, appearing in many forms, threatens liberal democracies. Surging religious but also ethical and cultural conflicts across the globe strikingly attest to the driving role of anger, rage, offense, and indignation in prolonged conflict. Capitalist economies and social inequalities are impacting not only people's cognitive and bodily capacities, but also their feelings and emotions. In turn, these feelings and emotions are commodified and mined as resources, while also being exploited as liabilities. The ubiquity and attention-grabbing reach of social media comes with intensified articulations of affect. These affective dynamics are frequently addressed at individuals or groups in a hostile or violent manner, creating an atmosphere of belligerence that fosters isolation and mistrust, and leaves people feeling exhausted, afraid, and without hope.

All these phenomena demonstrate the stakes of affect and emotion for personal, social, and political life in the global now. Understanding these stakes requires an approach to affect and emotion that goes beyond disciplinary boundaries. This theme-focused introduction

outlines the overarching promise of affect and emotion research as a pathway toward understanding the imbrications of the personal and the social, the intimate and the political. It brings together and consolidates the different ways in which affect and emotion have been investigated at the Berlin-based Collaborative Research Center *Affective Societies* over the past decade. The chapter offers a newly integrated understanding of affect and emotion and discusses how these guiding concepts can be put to use in two different ways: as essential elements of an affect-based social theory for the 21st century, and as diagnostic tools that help us analyze the transformations and challenges of contemporary societies.

Affect, Emotion, and the Politics of Relationality

There are far more approaches to affect and emotion than one can reasonably cover in a single chapter. Indeed, as Carolyn Pedwell and Greg Seigworth (2023) quip in their introduction to the *Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*, combing through the myriad affect-centered approaches can feel like an inverted game of musical chairs, where each time the music stops another chair is added so that the panoply of perspectives keeps multiplying. In view of this embarrassment of riches, it can seem hopeless to try to condense affect theory into any single formula or message. This, at any rate, is what many introductions to the field suggest when they begin with emphatic invocations of plurality and variance. But is it really credible to presume no single throughline behind the surface variance? Why then all the fuss about affect as *this one thing* that many are so excited about?

How about this: affect, emotion, and feeling—the three conceptual pillars of the affective universe—present the vital connecting tissue between the self and society, and therefore between the intimate and the political, the individual and the collective, the most deeply personal and the most ruthlessly public. The promise of affect is that it constitutes the pulse of how people are situated in their surroundings and relate to the world, both near and far: how connections to others, to social practices, to the world at large are made and sustained, but also how they are prevented, fended-off, denied. Affect, emotion, and feeling make up the substance of social relatedness, and their myriad entanglements present uniquely potent inroads into what matters for collectives and individuals. These lived relations are power-inflected, and prone to distortion, bias, and manipulation. As such they overshoot all too easily into extremes, and—given their existential weight and practical pertinence—become paramount objects of contestation in human affairs. Affect and emotion are where life is on the line, where the social gets spicy, where meaning and mattering are fought out and lived at the same time. Lived, that is, with all their inherent distortions, biases, and extremes, some of them long-standing and formative for troubling social and political formations. This is evident, for instance, in the ongoing legacies of conquest, poverty, social inequality, oppression, dispossession, violence—along with their myriad affective afterlives (Blickstein, 2019; Ferreira da Silva, 2009; Kohpeiß, 2025; Palmer, 2017, 2020; → *Colonialism as Affect*; → *Property as Affect*; → *Qadma*; → *Unfeeling*).

Ironically, in its world-disclosing potency, the affective also takes the place—or rather, has always occupied the place—that the Western Enlightenment tradition has accorded to reason. Is “reason” just an academic gloss on what is, in fact, the main business of affect and emotion: revealing the world to situated actors in such a way that values and needs are balanced with the facts? We tend to think so. When it comes to affect, things “get to us” (Withy, 2024). We are affected by what goes on; the vibe and atmosphere of our

surroundings touch us and reverberate through our embodied sense of ourselves and our circumstances. Accordingly, there is *truth* in emotion and affect: a sense for what is happening, what we must accept to be the case if we want to cope with or change a situation. There is *wisdom* in emotion and affect: the capacity to align personal significance with broader, shared frameworks of meaning. And it is for this very reason—the intelligence, attentiveness, and wisdom in the affective sphere—that affect and emotion are the supreme battleground of politics, large and small. If you are in the business of convincing people of a certain vision of reality, if your goal is to establish a shared understanding in order to ground a political movement or to build or dismantle an institution, you have no choice but to pay utmost attention to emotion and affect. Politics, at heart, is affective politics (Bens et al., 2019; Massumi, 2015). Political orientations are grounded in political emotions (Koschut, 2020; Szanto & Slaby, 2020). So, at its core, affect and emotion are about staying reasonably attuned to what is happening and what matters—so that meaningful collective action becomes possible. It is against the backdrop of this positive and intelligent vision that the distortions, exaggerations, and manipulations to which affect and emotion are prone should be analyzed and, if possible, amended.

We do not claim that scholars will have an easy time spotting the distortions, biases, or blind spots of individual and collective affective lives. On the contrary, it is often hardest to find fault with our own, or our society's, most cherished affective orientations, as these tend to feel like second nature, true and self-evident (Stodulka, 2019; Röttger-Rössler, 2019). But then again, the business of sorting out what ought to be done, all things considered—what the Western tradition glossed as Reason writ large—has never been straightforward. The point, rather, is that focusing on affect and emotion gives us a shot at getting to the heart of the matter: where the fate of human collectives is bound up with the deeper recesses of people's everyday orientations. Affect and emotion are reason in the flesh, meaning as sensed, embodied, lived. Start here, and you have a good chance of taking your scholarly tools to whatever presently matters most to individuals and collectives. This requires insight into the tendencies and pitfalls of affective phenomena and a well-honed receptivity to affective dynamics in one's surroundings, as well as a familiarity with prevalent modes of “emotional reflexivity” (Neckel & Sauerborn, 2023; → *Emotional Reflexivity*). This situated expertise—an affective and emotive literacy—is what the contributors of this volume strive to provide on the following pages.

Part of the fun—and the mess—in researching affect and emotion lies in how boundless and unconquerable they are. No affects, emotions, or feelings simply fall from the sky—or pop into our brains and bodies—ready-made; nor do they ever remain fixed and final. They always receive their shape and form dynamically as they unfold—in the cultural and structural circumstances of society, in performative, expressive, and discursive interaction. There is a *perpetual* self-constituting dynamic to affect-formation. This dynamic is insatiable in its tendency to incorporate ever new expressive and articulative resources: all kinds of terms, notions, expressions, gestures, enactments, postures, displays, styles, contexts, media, technologies, material scaffolds, and what have you enter into affective comportment as it takes shape, morphs, and transforms. The sense that scholars dealing with affect, in particular when working empirically, are trying to hunt a mirage, capture a ghost (→ *Haunting*), or nail the proverbial pudding to the wall, is much to the point. The exasperated sense of always coming a little too late, always only dealing with a stale, reductive, artificially arrested image of the “real thing,” is an all too familiar experience for scholars

of affect and emotion. This is where cultural affect theory has an advantage over the more categorically consolidated strands of emotion research. By embracing affect's fleetingness, the open-textured and incessantly dynamic nature of affect, affect theory faces up to affect's perpetual condition of being in-formation, forever nascent, never finished. And in fact, such formative dynamics even pertain at all times to the seemingly consolidated, categorically bounded "classical" emotions, where the formative processes are just slower, somewhat lagging, proceeding for the most part within well-trodden paths of consensual sociality, drawing mostly on conceptual resources already widely in use (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019; see also Frevert, 2024). But here too, these processes are never without a difference, however minor, never without making new and nascent inroads, even if slow and miniscule initially (Campbell, 1997).

We reiterate this here not because we want to add yet another defense of cultural affect theory, but because we want to suggest a way forward that does justice to the full spectrum of affect, from the most fleeting to the most consolidated. What we have elsewhere described as a relational and cross-culturally sensitive version of constructivism with regard to emotion (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019) applies to affectivity across the board. Affective phenomena evolve dynamically out of structural, discursive, and expressive resources, incorporating cultural repertoires, and thus might be approached from the vantage point of a socio-cultural constructivism. Such an approach does not omit the embodiment and physiological groundedness of affective behavior (Barrett, 2014), but indexes the bio-psychological basis of the affective with contextual factors and articulative capacities, in the spirit of new materialism (Röttger-Rössler & Markowitsch, 2009; Wilson, 2015). The point is not to assess the extent to which a given affective phenomenon might be dynamically open or categorically bounded, but rather to understand that situated dynamics of expression, enactment, articulation, and reflection are always at the heart of affective and emotive processes (Wetherell, 2012). This includes a heightened sense for the potential of affectivity to spearhead social and cultural transformation, for better or worse. Affect-powered transformation is always possible, but never assured. After all, affect can also engender stubborn attachment to the status quo (→ *Affective Stasis*), often supported by social techniques that help prevent emotive responses from arising or gaining momentum (→ *Unfeeling*), and become ossified within inert institutional arrangements (→ *Institutional Affect*) or long-standing socio-historical formations (→ *Colonialism as Affect*).

And so, after this opening salvo of promise and theory essentials, we turn to our current political moment. Obviously, the perspective sketched thus far could be applied to every topic under the sun that involves affect, but a substantial interest has developed over the past decades in applying affect to the realm of politics, broadly construed. The conflicts in this tension-riddled arena run deep and are of the highest consequence. This is particularly the case in contemporary societies in which transformation is rapid, crises abound, and disruption is high on the agenda of many political actors. To illustrate what we have in mind, we turn to a recent episode that unfolded under the beaming spotlight of international media.

Affect Runs the Show

For fans of linear TV news, Christiane Amanpour is the face of international conflicts, which she has covered for CNN since the first US-Iraq war in 1990. To say that she has seen

a lot is an understatement. Yet, on the afternoon of February 28, 2025, Amanpour stared at her screen in disbelief when she watched J.D. Vance and Donald J. Trump dress down the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, in the Oval Office on live TV. CNN posted a split-screen image showing a wide-eyed Amanpour, mouth agape, glaring in shock at a still of Trump arguing with Zelensky. The deacon of legacy media was having a melt-down witnessing the US president wreaking havoc on the transatlantic order. That CNN posted this reaction shot of its illustrious personality soon after the event itself shows the extent to which affect has become newsworthy in itself. Amanpour's expression is deployed to convey the gist of the scene. The incredulous look on the face of this anchor, who is an epitome of journalistic integrity, reveals all one needs to know about the disruptive impact of Trumpism in early 2025. Her reaction is, on the face of it, proportional to the glaring violation of what she, and perhaps by extension Western publics at large, cherishes as the rules and decorum of public political engagement. The Oval Office, in particular when broadcast live, should not be a place of insult, depreciation, and bullying. However, it is evident that affect itself has become the point here, both of Trump's and Vance's performance in the Oval and of this legacy journalist's instant reaction. Amanpour presents as credibly shocked in view of the takeover of raw affect in the most important office of the world—an imbecile shouting match in place of a high-stakes diplomatic exchange. Trump, as per usual, deadpans frivolously: "This is going to be great television. I will say that." It can count as a measure of success of Trump's shock and awe politics that CNN runs an image of a most respected journalist as clickbait minutes after a presidential press conference. Even a famed anchor known for searing analysis can't help being made complicit by posting a reaction shot that satisfies (and further amplifies) Trump's intent to overwhelm. The anchor's exasperation in the face of Trump's and Vance's theatrics is instantly converted into the currency of present-day affective politics: one more image to stir up the liberal status quo and "flood the zone."

Amanpour's facial expression in that image, the swiftness with which it was made into the story on CNN, is a telltale sign of our times. The image shows how affect has become a central messaging device in today's news media. In a slot machine-like attention economy (Hayes, 2025), the crystalline intensity of the emotional expression (and the affective image at large) is a major commodity. Amanpour's emotion, distilled into a pathos formula of the internet age (Schankweiler & Wüschner, 2019), travels instantly and achieves a reach that matches those of her journalistic analyses.¹ Contemporary culture has re-positioned affect from the margins to the center of the public sphere; affect mutates from embellishment and entertainment to the main act, on stage and in the engine room, at once message and medium. Affect tells the story, and affect runs the show.

This encapsulates a broader development. For one, the status of affect in public and political discourse has shifted, as have the rules that govern affect in various forms of political engagement. Further, for many, this forceful eruption of affect into the public sphere inevitably raises the question of what is going on beneath the surface. There is a long-standing tradition in the Western world of regarding affect in stark opposition to reason and rationality. This tradition idealizes a form of political decision-making that is only sound when void of affective turbulence, and that is embodied in a culture of considerate rational judgment. It is no wonder that, in view of recent displays of vile in the political arena, many public commentators jump to one drastic conclusion: affect and emotion have replaced considerate judgment as the holy grail of political decision-making. Even more than that, they are seen as evidence that the principles of liberalism and Enlightenment that have been

the aspirational standard of Western publics since WW2 have eroded. Principles such as upholding a shared set of binding epistemic criteria to govern political decision-making and deliberation; accepting the force of argument; and recognizing the legitimacy of institutions like science, the law, and a free and impartial press. Arguably, fact-based argument and procedural diligence have been on the retreat (Börzel et al., 2025), but Amanpour's reaction reveals that many, deep down, still fundamentally assume—and value—some version of Enlightenment rational proceduralism as the proper currency of governance and institutional integrity.

This view does not perfectly align with political divides, but most of us will probably agree that, currently, liberals and moderate conservatives alike see themselves as guardians of the principles of well-reasoned judgment, whereas populist and authoritarian rulers are the entrepreneurs of affect and polarization. Trump and his allies are on a mission to deal blow after blow to these Enlightenment assumptions. Daily displays of vile, hatred, and disregard for legality are meant to beat the remnants of the liberal mind like a drum. Everything in this is calculated, the putative chaos fully intended, and it even has a name: “owning the libs” (e.g., Marcotte, 2018). However, seen in this light, Amanpour's display of shock reveals the omnipresence and ambivalence of affect. The enlightened mind, of course, is not void of affect, and public discourse has never been an idealized zone of affective neutrality. Amanpour's outrage matches the severity of Trump's and Vance's violation of the rule-based order. By capitalizing on her affective demeanor, the news network inevitably plays into the hands of the populist polarization entrepreneurs. Amanpour's shock is commodified into a meme signaling exactly the intended message: the liberal order is dying, disruption reigns, and a new era of populist politics and authoritarian statecraft has arrived.

Affect is thus situated at a crossroads: its honest expression, attuned to what actually goes on in the political arena, is freezing in place to become a commodity and a marker of disruption. When the game of public affect is played under today's conditions of frenzied networked media, the calm, considerate, fact-based, reasonable take on a situation likely loses out. But there may be no real alternative. The global media ecosystem is now geared almost exclusively toward these rapid-reaction displays of affect, spreading contagiously across platforms and into people's homes and phones. Amanpour's shock image epitomizes the liberal mind in its death trap. With the path of reason blocked, have we entered a post-rational public spectacle, left with only a hapless participation in an onslaught of affective messaging?

At any rate, this is the path we are on. This episode, featuring Christiane Amanpour and its conflicting positioning of affect at the center of attention, is exemplary for the current standing of affect and emotion in public and political life. When affect runs the political show, when affect is message and medium at once, a tendency toward exaggeration and intensity is likely to overwhelm more carefully attuned experiences and orientations. Authoritarian and populist performances are attacks on more nuanced, hesitant, and well-calibrated sensoriums, despised as the emotion regimes of the liberal political establishment. The public sphere is challenged by chainsaw- and sledgehammer-wielding political operatives. Unhinged pundits and hot-take artists shout down considerate statements and throw out every inkling of balance and restraint in favor of polarizing, maximum-impact addresses. Affect is not going to leave the stage any time soon. Which may be why the liberal incumbents and leftist progressives have yet to develop an emotional antidote to authoritarian affect mongers, a way to acknowledge and advertise the affects of emancipatory politics.

Under these conditions, what is a worthwhile and realistic task for affect and emotion research? Part of the answer is straightforward: when affect and emotion have indeed risen to such prominence in public life, then expertise on this topic is all the more called for. And as with all expertise, its strength is to be able to inform a stance that goes beyond the surface phenomena to probe deeper into what is going on. This includes a well-honed capacity to identify the underlying stakes of affective quarrels and displays (→ *Contested Emotions*), and of orientations, dispositions, and biases. It includes a sense for the many ways in which the new designs and formats of networked media calibrate the public sphere; inform practices of communication, political action, and governance; and set up new infrastructures of feeling (Coleman, 2025 → *Infrastructures of Feeling*). The workings of public institutions—in sectors such as education, health, state administration, or the law—come to be seen as deeply dependent on the affective orientations and practices of institutional actors, while also drawing on affect-imbued cultural imaginaries in their time- and place-bound iterations (Churcher et al., 2023; Dilger & Warstat, 2021; → *Institutional Affect*). Affect-themed expertise also informs a powerful critical stance that can help observers to look beyond the surface clamor to the tactics and strategies of various polarization entrepreneurs of today's political publics (→ *Emotional Politics*; → *Outrage Politics*; → *Affects of Critique*). In all these efforts, the guiding orientation is to stay true to the insight that affect and emotion are not, in fact, opposed to a situated stance of reason—or to reason's role in informing considerate judgment and legitimate institutional procedures. On the contrary, affect and emotion epitomize reason's promise to balance what goes on (the factual) and what matters (the evaluative) in order to motivate and guide collective action.

We think that a good way to stay true to this orientation under today's vexing conditions is to bring theoretical and methodological expertise on affect and emotion to bear on a diagnostic stance on contemporary societal developments. To elaborate, we will now delve into one major area of contemporary concern, namely that affect and emotion have come to constitute a political battlefield in their own right. They have become highly contested matters in public and political affairs, a veritable “Streitsache” (fighting matter), to use a fitting German term (→ *Contested Emotions*). Emotions, as inherently normative, are by default subject to critique, because they might be out of step with their occasions, not fitting to their objects or disproportionate to the (in)significance of what has stirred them (Szanto & Tietjen, in press; von Maur & Slaby, 2024). But over and above this default contestability that emotions share with other reason-responsive attitudes such as belief and desire, the last years have seen a notable rise in much more fundamental quarrels about affect and emotion that far exceed this default normative contestability.

Consider, for instance, climate activists in Europe who push for acceptance of scientific findings about global warming and its consequences for societies. Such activists often call out the putative apathy and unfeeling disregard of political and business elites, as well as the complacent majority (Slaby, 2023). In response, climate activists are often derided as hysterical, irrational, naively sentimental, or overly panicked, while their push for a rapid and radical transformation of society is deemed reckless and irresponsible. “The Greens cannot feel poverty,” the German Left Party politician Jan van Aken was recently quoted as saying. This is a case in point, since he—or, at any rate, the tabloid BILD in which his quote appeared—framed this presumed lack of feeling as a rebuttal against a political faction that prioritizes climate mitigation.² This accusation targets a group's very capacity to experience specific emotions. It illustrates the hard-fought battle about societal priorities in

times of economic pressure and ecological peril, but also conveys an undertone of moral accusation that shoots straight at the identities and self-understandings of a political party's members and constituency. Such disputes indicate the extent to which affect and emotion have become a major battleground for a number of pressing issues, such as the orientation and direction societies should take, their political strides and collective ethos, and—even more fundamentally—about the basic parameters of reality that social collectives face. Accordingly, a timely approach to affect, emotion, and feeling in the public key must probe these quarrels and their underlying stakes.

It is no coincidence that such principled disputes play out as quarrels about feeling. Both the contents and the quality of these confrontations reveal that the affective is considered to be decisive in determining what it means to exist responsibly in the present times. Other examples readily come to mind. The disputes over refugees, asylum-seekers, and “irregular” migration in both Europe and the US often play out as a conflict about character-defining emotive attitudes such as empathy, conscience, or the lack of it (variously called “coldness,” “heartlessness,” “no conscience”). Meanwhile, humanitarian volunteers who support arriving refugees or conduct life-saving missions in the Mediterranean have been accused of radicalism, called lunatics or ridiculed as “snow flakes,” to mention only the less severe labels. In early 2025, tech entrepreneur and billionaire Elon Musk told podcaster Joe Rogan “We have civilizational suicidal empathy going on.”³

These fights, which have come to dominate large segments of public debate, force individuals to take sides in a culture war. The underlying clashes of ethico-political orientations, as well as the disputes about determining what counts as real for society at a given time, accordingly warrant careful consideration. What has become clear even from the above snippets is the depth and vigor with which conflicts about emotions touch the roots of the self, on the part of both human individuals and of groups and communities. The stakes in these debates have risen considerably. Brandishing protestors as “anger citizens” (*Wutbürger* in German), humanitarian volunteers as “Gutmenschen,” or student activists either as “snow-flakes” or—sometimes the very same groups—as “domestic terrorists” does not aim at correcting insufficiently warranted attitudes, but condemns others, placing them outside the sphere of what the accuser deems reasonable and ethical practice and discourse. At this level of contestation, criticizing another's emotion amounts to condemning them or condescending to them. The accuser points to another's moral or intellectual deficits, and deems them a liability for the collective. Criticizing emotional attitudes here equals an attack on the person: the other is presented as corrupt, feeble, reckless, heartless, or intellectually lacking. From there, it is but a small step toward character assassinations, hate speech, and group-based discrimination. And today, this might put us on a path toward irregular removals of staff and elected officials, and potentially toward political persecutions, extra-legal arrests, or even disappearances. These troubling tendencies are certainly not mitigated by the polarization, messaging style, and lack of nuance in much of today's networked media and the adjacent culture of online outrage and alarmism.

That affect runs the show in public life—through battles over reality and over the ethos of our societies—confirms the pertinence of our initiative's title *Affective Societies*. Affect and emotion are at the forefront of social and political life, with major effects on the form and content of social interaction and public debate. The salience of affective matters in society is not a new development. But it has reached new heights and crossed the threshold to a dominant cultural mode. And we can now better glean some of the implications of this

long-evolving sea change, such as a more polarized, more personalized, much less nuanced public, drifting further and further away from aspirations to procedural fairness, rule of law, equity, objectivity, and rational debate.

In light of this, the title *Affective Societies* takes seriously the affective and emotional substance of contemporary societies, their lines of conflict, stylistic trends, ideological trajectories, and aesthetic tastes. It does so by probing the affective workings of public institutions (in sectors such as education, health, state administration, and the law), the templates and infrastructures of (new) media, and the affective and emotional vicissitudes of politics and political communication. And it considers the many informal sites and settings of social life, where contemporary existence is organized and meaning produced, negotiated, and fought about in myriad large and small acts of affecting and being affected.

Affective Relationality: Backbone of the *Affective Societies* Approach

The wager of this *New Key Concepts* volume is that scholarship on affect can weave together longstanding insights from interdisciplinary affect and emotion research with a diagnostic take on the present moment. If successful, affect and emotion scholarship will do justice to the ubiquity and centrality of affect and emotion, approaching their present manifestations with a contemporaneous sensibility (→ *Affective Contemporaneity*). Such scholarship engages directly with core issues and quarrels about how human lifeworlds should be shaped, and how institutions responding to global crises are to be designed, reformed, or abolished.

The boom of affect theory and emotion research in the past three decades has been apt and timely when one considers it in relation to its historical context (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Pedwell & Seigworth, 2023; Scarantino, 2024). These approaches have tracked a notable societal development. The rise in social value placed of all things affective has been accompanied—and often driven—by expert discourses and programs for the assessment, training, therapy, and management of emotions. The ascent of affect and emotion as focal frames for the interpretation and commandeering of social life has run in lockstep with other developments. These include the refinement and dissemination of knowledge about emotions; nuanced vocabularies; emotional granularity; sharpened awareness; and novel forms of expertise deployed to train, cultivate, channel, and regulate the affective lives of people and to design and refine affective niches (e.g., Neckel, 2014; → *Emotional Reflexivity*). In the domains of politics and public discourse, for instance, this has led to the monitoring—and policing—of discourse with regard to hate speech (now in itself a contested concept) and what some discredit as “political correctness”; the surveying of societies with regard to how much they are “affectively polarized” (Bakker & Lelkes, 2024; Röllicke, 2023); the examination of the emotionalization of political debate in parliaments and on social media; or the development of programs of awareness and mindfulness in the political sphere. These developments are inextricable from the advent of therapy culture and the capitalist valuation of affectivity. These range from emotional labor in the workplace and affective displays or performances in popular culture, to the commodified affective experiences that drive the service economy, such as fine dining, romantic holidays, and dating apps (e.g., Illouz, 2007).

This emotional reflexivity is a further indicator that affect and emotion have become a prime medium of societies’ self-understanding. Discourses, practices, and scientific insights into affect and emotion present the contemporary articulation of life and meaning in today’s

societies. When it comes to scholarship on affect and emotion, the many manifestations and materializations of emotional reflexivity must figure prominently among the objects of study. This is reflected in the methodological orientation of our research. When studying affect and emotions, scholars deal with situated, articulated, culturally formed, and refined phenomena. When affective phenomena are relatively stable in the form of dispositions, habits, and repertoires, one might speak of a layer of cultural artifice that has sedimented within contemporary lifeworlds. When they are more dynamic and fleeting, one deals with ongoing processes of interactive and interpretive shaping. Accordingly, affect and emotion research requires a versatile constructivist orientation as well as local expertise and familiarity with the domains in which affect and emotion have become drivers of practice and behavior. To contend with this complexity in the object domain, we are helped by a concept of emotion that stresses the socio-cultural embeddedness as well as the discursive and practical shaping of emotive orientations in various settings. Therefore, *Affective Societies* researchers understand emotions as parts of domain-specific yet mobile *repertoires of emotion* (von Poser et al., 2019). Such repertoires, while individually embodied, enacted, expressed, and articulated, are prone to travel, and capable of informing emotional engagements and practices in other domains and at other places and times (*pathos formulas*; see Schankweiler & Wüschner, 2019). The dependence of individual emotions on these repertoires—and on their continual refinement and reinterpretation—means that changes in collective emotional practices and understandings have significant consequences. This cultural dynamic impacts the depth, quality, and range of what individuals are able to feel and express, as well as the emotional performances they are compelled to enact in different social settings (Hochschild, 1983; Reddy, 2001; Röttger-Rössler, 2002; Wetherell, 2012).

To tackle this ever-evolving topic, the researchers in the *Affective Societies* center have combined a social theoretical perspective on affect and emotion with a diagnostic stance on societal developments. The initiative's title is meant to convey this dual orientation, at once a firm grounding in social theory (affect as the prime mover of sociality from micro to macro) and a diagnostic angle in the guise of a time-bound, locally concretized “theory of society” (the patented German *Gesellschaftstheorie*). Together, these researchers forged a potent analytical toolkit for assessing new larger developments as well as finer variations of affective social life, spanning domains such as politics, media, communication, the public sphere, the economy, and other key institutional sectors.

On the conceptual level, a founding impulse of the initiative has been to approach affect and emotion from the vantage point of a social theory centered on *affective relationality*. This concept emphasizes the ways affective relations shape human sociality, social practices, and its consolidated patterns in institutions, organizations, and other paramount sites of social life. We understand affective relationality from the outset as a modality of *power*—a dynamic efficaciousness that either creates, shapes, and endows, or, conversely, that constrains, obstructs, or destroys.

As a social theoretical concept, “affect” figures doubly in this perspective. On a basic level, it is the conceptual starting point, anchoring the perspective in terms of an ontological approach to affective relationality. In this generative sense of the term, “affect” designates a fundamental relationality between entities of all kinds: a dynamic, efficacious, and formative force that inheres in all human practices, interactions, and domains. We understand such affective relationality as dynamics of power: affective relations either enhance or diminish the capacities of the entities involved, in ways that can be enabling and

productive, or constraining and destructive (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019). This connects our approach with a perspective that stresses the productive and relational manifestations of power within the social fabric, transposing Foucault's insights on formative power and the power/knowledge nexus into affect theory (Mühlhoff, 2018; Mühlhoff & Slaby, 2018). Ideally, this orientation will sensitize scholars of affect to the uses and abuses of power within the myriad relations, positionings, and interactions of everyday life.

This abstract level of relationality is only a starting point, an anchor for a thought style, and a generative principle for the development of many more situated concepts that can be put to work in empirical research (Slaby & Mühlhoff, 2019). Accordingly, scholars and researchers at *Affective Societies* also use “affect” in a pragmatic manner, as a mid-range concept that pertains to empirically observable relations of affecting and being affected, and the capacities these relations engender, tied to specific domains of practice, variously shaped and crafted in recurring interactions, framed by technology, mediatized and much-elaborated by discourse, symbols, and imaginaries. Affect, in this understanding, pertains to situated relations in social encounters, manifesting as, for instance, “atmospheres” (Riedel, 2019) or forms of “attachment” (Scheidecker, 2019; see also Kasmani, 2019), and modes of “belonging” (Mattes et al., 2019; see also Dilger et al., 2018, 2020). Individuals experience affect in the form of “feelings” (Thonhauser, 2019), while affect coalesces on the plane of the social into “social collectives” (von Scheve, 2019) or dynamic and transient “affective communities” (Zink, 2019). Building on the foundational notion of affect and on an approach to affect as “immersive power” (Mühlhoff & Schütz, 2019), various derivative concepts have been introduced that facilitate a nuanced understanding of the varieties of situated affectivity: “affective resonance” (Mühlhoff, 2019a), “affective disposition” (Mühlhoff, 2019b), “affective arrangement” (Slaby, 2019), “affective practice” (Wiesse, 2019), as well as more specific forms of affective practices such as “affective witnessing” (Richardson & Schankweiler, 2019; see also Givoni, 2016) or “writing affect” (Fleig, 2019). Downstream from these articulations are concepts such as “affective economy” (Lehmann et al., 2019; see also Ahmed, 2004), “affective publics” (Lünenborg, 2019), and “affective citizenship” (Ayata, 2019) that emphasize how affect operates in institutions and in fields such as media, the economy, state bureaucracy, health care, and the law. These also often epitomize local manifestations of “political affect” (Slaby & Bens, 2019). Political affect, in turn, plays out as a back and forth between forms of affective governance and open or latent forms of affective resistance, for instance as part of movements and protests that engender so-called “Midān moments” (Ayata & Harders, 2019). Relatedly, “affects of racialization” (Blickstein, 2019) spotlight the misuse of affective attributions and affective governance to exclude, constrain, police, and often dehumanize groups of subjects that do not match a hegemonic template of personhood. Alongside this perspective on power, governance, and resistance, other scholars at the center have studied aesthetic uses and misuses of affect, reviving concepts such as “pathos formula” (Schankweiler & Wüschner, 2019), developing a notion of “poetics of affect” geared to audiovisual media and art forms (Kappelhoff & Lehmann, 2019), studying “audience emotions” (Kolesch & Knoblauch, 2019), and using performances of immersive theatre as a test case for studying affect in situ. Art-based forms of inquiry and expertise have enriched our conceptual perspective in many ways, which has also been reflected methodologically (see the contributions in the *Affective Societies* methods volume; Kahl, 2019).

Unlike much work in cultural affect theory, the *Affective Societies* approach does not prioritize affect one-sidedly over emotion. Instead, our approach has led us to consider an

integrative understanding of emotion alongside the dynamic-relational approach to affect (von Scheve & Slaby, 2019), leading us to propose a novel notion of emotion repertoires, which reflects the productive tension between individual embodiment and the mediatized formation and circulation of emotions (von Poser et al., 2019). In so doing, *Affective Societies* incorporates many insights from the various strands of emotion research that have emerged over the last decades. In particular, it combines a socio-cultural constructivist perspective with notions of performativity, mediatization, and embodiment, also drawing on phenomenological and analytical approaches from philosophy (e.g., Colombetti & Krueger, 2015; von Maur, 2021) and on theory and research from the sociology of emotion (Hochschild, 2024; Illouz, 2023). By revitalizing a notion of longer-lasting, socially stabilized emotive attitudes which underwrite normative orientations, namely “sentiments” (Bens & Zenker, 2019), as well as a timely performative understanding of “audience emotions” (Kolesch & Knoblauch, 2019), scholars at the center have brought new impulses to interdisciplinary emotion research. These lines of work show that a dynamic-relational approach to affect can enrich scholarship on emotion, and helps bring out the strengths of both new-materialist and post-humanist approaches to affect and key legacies of emotion theory and research in fields such as sociology, (social) psychology, philosophy, social and cultural anthropology, as well as strands of history, media, and communications theory, and film, performance, and theatre studies.

Affect Theory for the 21st Century: Main Perspectives and Outline of Chapters

The first volume of *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (Slaby & von Scheve, 2019) was the conceptual kick-off for the interdisciplinary initiative. Accordingly, the book developed concepts that constituted the groundwork for the shared approach. Contributors did not stray too far from the conceptual roots in the guiding notions of affect and emotion. As can be expected, in this *New Key Concepts* volume, published seven years after the first one, authors build on much-diversified approaches and set their sights on a broader array of topics. What hasn't changed since 2019, however, is our shared understanding of concepts as methodological tools—much like Herbert Blumer's (1954) *sensitizing concepts*. Instead of conceiving of concepts as narrowly circumscribed and reductively defined, we understand concepts as richly situated and grounded in their domains of application, while also inextricable from the experiential and practical sensorium of the scholars and writers that work with them, which is why authors' viewpoints and voices are crucial to concepts in our understanding (Slaby et al., 2019).

The overall goal of the *Affective Societies* initiative, which sets it apart from many other approaches to affect in cultural studies and the humanities, is to make the concepts of affect and emotion productive for theoretical as well as for empirical research. The empirical research carried out at the *Affective Societies* center is characterized by a keen interest in concrete social and political issues, in situated and embodied activities and practices, at particular sites and places, in specific archives and discourses related to affect and emotion. If affective relationality is the overarching perspective of the *Affective Societies* center, the concepts assembled in this *New Key Concepts* volume are those that zoom into focus and accentuate these particular sites, practices, constellations, and discourses. They are both outcomes of empirical research and, at the same time, guiding tools and magnifying lenses for reflecting on those outcomes.

The range of concepts assembled in the present volume contributes to five distinct and original themes (Parts I–V) through which readers can come to terms with how affect and emotion characterize the contemporary social and political landscape. A sixth section (Part VI) offers three *Perspective* chapters that interrogate some of the present developments in the broader field of affect and emotion and offer perspectives for future avenues of research inspired by the concepts assembled in this volume.

The notion of *Affective Societies* has always implied two different analytical perspectives: one that emphasizes, from a social theory standpoint, affect and emotion as foundational for social life, and a second perspective that hints at the different ways societies themselves become preoccupied with affect and emotion, often in a reflexive manner. Various contemporary discourses, media, and technologies are geared toward monitoring, documenting, negotiating, and managing citizens' affects and emotions, from health apps to stock market indices, sentiment mining and analyses feeding social media algorithms, automated facial expression recognition systems, research initiatives that monitor society's levels of affective polarization and hate speech, up to political and civil society actors campaigning for more emotional awareness and less emotionalized forms of debate. Societies' preoccupation with individual and collective emotions is of course no coincidence, but is driven by the widespread belief, backed by scientific insights, that emotions fulfill important psychological and social "functions," that they are resources people can put to work to achieve individual and political ends. Likewise, this almost inadvertently leads to the normative framing of affect and emotion in culture and disputes about particular emotions and their intensities, their general status in social and political affairs, and the legitimacy of their utilization and exploitation. The six chapters of the volume's first theme, *Governance, Reflexivity, Contestation*, all address the different ways in which societies more or less reflexively attend to affect and emotion.

Emotional reflexivity is a concept that stresses how emotions inform thinking and sense-making, and how feelings become objects of conscious reflection. Elgen Sauerborn's chapter extends this concept by, first, exploring how institutions explicitly refer to emotions and render them objects of public and political negotiation and discourse, and, second, examining how the social dimensions of emotions, in particular norms and ideals, are integrated into the reflexive process. Christian von Scheve's chapter introduces the concept of *contested emotions*. Going beyond views of emotions as drivers of conflict or modes of debate and negotiation, the concept emphasizes how emotions themselves become focal points of disagreement in contemporary social and political conflicts, exploring how emotional responses are increasingly subject to normative and discursive contestation. Jonas Harbke and colleagues then develop a conceptual framework for *emotional politics* based on three essential ingredients—campaigning, polarization, and governance—and outline how emotions mobilize support, shape perceptions, and influence political decision-making. In the subsequent contribution, Michal Givoni argues that *outrage politics* has come to characterize practices of critique and protest, becoming a tool of public communication that inverts the expression of political impotence, and that ultimately stems from obstructed, rather than vitalizing, feelings. *Affective mobilization*, developed by Hansjörg Dilger and colleagues, focuses on three essential criteria of mobilization: the role of bodies and sensations, the resonances and conflicts within and between social movements and institutions, and the different outcomes of collective mobilization. The final contribution of this first theme by Gesa Jessen introduces the concept of *reading relations* as a new way of analyzing

literature as a socially embedded practice. Jessen emphasizes how the seemingly solitary act of reading is shaped by social belonging, ethical attitudes, and political positions, and the implications for the broader reception of literature across professional criticism and user-generated content on platforms like social media.

No human life is untouched by the orientations, decisions, and quarrels of grand-scale politics, yet much of people's day-to-day existence unfolds outside the limelight of the big political stage. Life is lived locally, in the immediacy of quotidian practices, interactions, and rituals in their settings and arrangements. It is a strength of the approaches belonging to affect theory that they take scholars beyond the big picture of discursive formations and collective action into myriad domains of mundane dwelling. Scholars with such local expertise possess a sensorium for the minutiae of embodied sensuous existence. Ethnographically trained scholars of affect embed themselves in various locales to partake in the lives of "normal people" in their homely environments. Somewhere "over there," at a remove from politics writ-large and big-picture media discourse, people live and die, love and hate, thrive or languish, seek treatment, turn to each other for care and consolation, engage in religious and popular rituals, draw on available technologies and media to get in touch with one another, entertain themselves, and partake in what they understand to be their present historical moment. Theoretical and diagnostic perspectives on social life strive to get at these experiences, at "how it is" to exist here and now. No approach to affect and emotion will meet its objects when it does not get in close touch with such modes of mundane dwelling in all of their richness, ambiguity, contradictions, and interpretations. However, such "going local" presents challenges of its own. To prevent the myopia of the too-deeply immersed, it is helpful to tie the ethnography of local affective relations back into the study of institutional arrangements, distributions of power, and discursive formations.

Institutions are where the mundane meets the systemic. The arrangements, protocols, and choreographed practices of institutions provide the frame of reference for affective experience, as well as its symbolic and material infrastructure. Accordingly, the study of institutions has become a focal point of our research. Here, emphasis is placed on modes of embodied dwelling and affective experience within the material, social, and technological arrangements of institutions. Affect, it turns out, is always *institutional affect*, since its manifestations largely unfold under the jurisdiction of—and sometimes in opposition to—one institutional arrangement or another. Meanwhile affects are also shaped by larger-scale and global institutional orders that reverberate through society in discourses and practice—such as legal frameworks, or the norms of gender, family, and kinship.

This is why the next two thematic parts of the volume combine inquiries into the sensory texture of embodied dwelling with perspectives on the affective lives of institutions. In some instances, both dimensions intersect closely, for instance in the study of affective practices such as psychiatric and hospice care (→ *Sensory Care*), forms of self-care and digital self-treatment (→ *Affective Treatment*), or contemporary digital media practices (→ *Affective Media*; → *Infrastructures of Feeling*). The key concepts that anchor these two sections are *sensory care* and *home feelings* on the side of the ethnographic perspectives, and *institutional affect*, *affective media*, and *infrastructures of feeling* on part of the institution- and technology-oriented approaches.

The chapter on sensory care by Max Müller and colleagues condenses findings from a multisensory ethnography of caregiving in Vietnamese communities in Berlin. It shows how care—in psychiatric clinics and hospices—emerges locally through atmospheres, bodily

textures, and sensory cues, and how culturally insensitive practices can occasion affective dissonance, discomfort, and alienation. Gregory Gan's chapter on *Home Feelings* outlines how the terms "home" and "feeling" come to be inextricable when considered phenomenologically. The home as a physical space and as a subjective site of profound attachments anchors material and sensorial relations that hold the deep texture of worldly dwelling. The concept of home feelings thus transcends the research sites of ethnography. It signifies the affective bedrock of being-in-the-world as such. The other chapters in the part on *Senses, Belonging, Care* foreground more specific perspectives. İlke İmer, Claudia Liebelt, and Mayıs Tokel develop the concept of *Olfactory Affect* by drawing on comparative ethnographic research in urban settings in Berlin and Istanbul. They show how the sense of smell is implicated in modes of affective governance that apportion belonging and non-belonging in processes of racialization and othering. The text shows how sensory modalities are recruited into institutional arrangements, while it also focuses on practices of resistance and contestation. Taoyi Yang's chapter on *Affective Treatment* highlights an emerging socio-affective practice of digital capitalism: situated in the unmarked space beyond medical therapy and psychological emotion regulation, affective treatment encompasses various do-it-yourself practices of reflexive self-care and self-treatment that draw on digital technologies and media content to transform modes of dwelling in conducive and innovative ways.

Part III is entitled *Institutions, Economy, Media*. As hinted earlier, the contributions to this part align with the ones in the previous part on *Senses, Belonging, Care*. The chapter on *Institutional Affect*—by Millicent Churcher, Sandra Calkins, Jandra Böttger, and Jan Slaby—explores how staple institutions in late-modern societies rely on affect to ensure their functioning. The authors argue that affect is inextricable from institutions' material settings. Affect shapes powerful imaginaries behind the institution's avowed mission, and the way it governs the conduct and demeanor of its functionaries and addressees. All of which highlights the coercive, exclusionary, and oppressive effects of key state institutions (such as law courts, schools, or hospitals), and the centrality of affect for critically analyzing the authoritarian takeover of democratic societies.

Jonas Bens's chapter—*Property as Affect*—reconstructs how Western understandings of the institution of property operate as an affective relation that profoundly shapes the hierarchies of modern life. The chapter revisits the colonial life of property in the context of emerging capitalism and modern statehood, and suggests ways for seeking out alternative modes of affective relationality that are less hierarchical and violent. Besides property and the law, economic markets are a central institution of the global present, whose effects ramify widely through contemporary societies. Markus Lange's chapter on *Market Affects* discusses the affectivity that markets and market relations both require and help produce, especially in view of a persistent uncertainty about the future, characteristic of capitalist markets. The chapter expands the purview of the Berlin-based affect theory framework by explicitly dealing with staple segments of the capitalist economy. Lange shows that markets are affectively configured domains of power that both impact and respond to social and ecological environments.

The following two chapters chart a much more familiar terrain native to affect theory: the intersection of affect and contemporary (mostly digital) media. Bernd Bösel's chapter on *Affective Media* discusses a double quality of media. On the one hand, media fixate and arrest affect into nameable episodes, for instance, in practices of affect tracking or affective computing. On the other hand, media dynamize and mobilize affect in interactive arrangements

such as gaming, social media, and the ubiquitous use of smartphones. Well-aligned with this perspective, Ana Makhashvili and Margreth Lünenborg draw on Rebecca Coleman’s (2018, 2025) concept of “infrastructures of feeling”—a play on Raymond Williams’s (1977) classic “structures of feeling”—to analyze how the set-up and design of media formats and digital platforms create affective affordances. Features such as emoji reactions on Facebook or Instagram, filters on Snapchat, or duets on TikTok, as well as the algorithmic curation that prioritizes highly interactive content, all modulate users’ emotional expression and their affective interactions. These infrastructural aspects of digital media represent a thus-far under-theorized aspect of how networked publics are created and modulated, and help us see both the benefits and problems of affect’s fluidity within today’s digital media landscapes. Part III concludes with a nuanced affect-analysis of a more classical media format: the archive. Kerstin Schankweiler’s innovative approach highlights the archive as a meeting ground of affect and history. By no means neutral and static repositories of documents or artifacts, affective archives are described as living, embodied phenomena where affective experiences are preserved, reactivated, suppressed, and often fought-about—dynamic arenas of negotiation and contestation over how societies feel about their pasts and imagine their futures.

The affective archive segues us into the volume’s more explicit dealings with the temporality and historicity of affect and emotion. Part IV, *Echoes, Hauntings, Prefigurations*, collects work on different temporal layers of affective formations. Although affect theory has long surpassed some of its earlier tendencies to portray affect as a matter of synchronic relations and dynamics in the present (Baraitser, 2017; Berlant, 2011; Riley, 2019; Sharpe, 2016), there is still a noticeable lack of reflection on the deeper temporal recesses and historical remainders that inform affective arrangements, affective dispositions, and affective practices. Scholars in the *Affective Societies* center have increasingly homed-in on affective aspects of time and history. As in most scholarship on the temporal dimension of cultural life, manifestations of historical time are thematized together with the experiential dimension of lived time—the durational exigencies of historical experience; of anticipation and prefiguration; as well as modes of enduring, stalling, or speeding-up the time of an extended now. In line with this, thematic Part IV of the volume brings together texts that focus on the affective manifestation of the temporal modalities in their respective entanglement with historical time. The four chapters of this part resonate closely with one another as they explore complementary modes of temporality: how past, present, and future intersect in uneasy, often disavowed or repressed ways, derailing linear and normative conceptions of history.

In a collaborative project between literary studies and theatre studies, Anne Fleig and Matthias Warstat develop the concept of *Affective Contemporaneity*. This notion is meant to convey the co-presence of distinct trajectories of temporal experience and historical consciousness in a mediatized world marked by unequal yet temporally parallel forms of life. Pushing beyond notions of chronological simultaneity, the authors argue that contemporaneity is affectively negotiated—produced through embodied practices and artistic representations that render time tangible and make history felt. Literature and theatre are shown to be art forms well suited to craft affective modalities that structure temporal belonging, while also conveying a searing sense for the tensions, fractures, and antagonisms that the simultaneity of distinct strands of historical belonging are likely to engender. In his chapter on *Haunting*, Fabian Bernhardt revitalizes a productive line of poststructuralist work on the marginal yet often quietly insistent claims of unresolved pasts. Drawing on Avery Gordon

and Tony Morrison, among others, Bernhardt explores the shadowy space between the tangible and the intangible, analyzing haunting as a structure of feeling marked by latency, atmospheric charge, and temporal recursion. Unseemly revenants from the past disturb linear notions of time, sabotage the calming recourse to composed normative postures, moving afflicted subjects bit by bit to the limits of what they can bear or control. The chapter also touches upon the affective valence of the figure of the ghost as a surprisingly tangible intruder into sanitized lifeworlds beset by repressed legacies of violent conquest.

Theresa Schütz and Doris Kolesch focus on the converse temporal direction, showing how the performing arts make possible worlds imaginable, by creating future scenarios and generating new ways of feeling. With the concept of *Prefigurative Aesthetics*, Schütz and Kolesch characterize aesthetic strategies in contemporary dance and performance that creatively anticipate future worlds. Against the backdrop of a heightened sense of crisis and catastrophe—ecological, political, and social—the performing arts become a laboratory for producing futures—in all their uncertainty—and anticipating sensibilities and subjectivities-to-come. The contribution emphasizes the nonlinear temporality of prefigurative aesthetics, drawing on notions such as crip time and horizontality in order to envision the affective texture of a counter-modern futurity. In the fourth and final chapter of Part IV, Paola Ivanov and Laibor Kalanga Moko develop a critical understanding of colonialism as a time-imbued affective formation that reverberates through the global present. *Colonialism as Affect* interlaces an understanding of colonialism as an ongoing oppressive formation with a focus on affect as a historically charged dimension of colonial power. The felt experience of colonialism is centered in a critical effort to understand the reach and depth of dispossessive violence, taking into account non-Western ontologies pertaining to the status of objects, possessions, and ancestry. The authors tie this perspective to decolonial efforts by elucidating the stakes of current debates about the restitution of colonial collections in European ethnographic museums, drawing on the lived and felt experiences of the colonized.

The final main thematic part foregrounds what is already evident in many of the previous contributions: how the affective fabric of contemporary lifeworlds always entails tensions, conflicts, and modes of resistance. As the chapters in Part I have shown, affect and emotions are modalities of politics that usually involve both open and manifest conflicts and less tangible, latent, often repressed tensions, quarrels, and disagreements, some of which only appear in the guise of vague premonitions or intimations of discord. In Part V, *Friction, Stasis, Suppression*, authors highlight several ways such tensions and subtle conflicts become manifest, are explicitly thematized (in affective modes of critique or forms of affective engagement), or remain latent within social or individual formations that suppress, deflect, or otherwise curb affective energies in favor of affective stasis or societal unfeeling. This returns us to the beginning of this introduction and to the chapters in Part I dealing with the affective and emotional vicissitudes of current politics. Power-inflected social formations can be analyzed as amalgamations of manifest and latent conflict, and organized sociality in the Global North often relies on the suspension, suppression, temporary calming, or outright denial of antagonisms, conflicts, and disagreements. Politically aware scholars of affect find many inroads for studying affective practices and formations that respond to the antagonistic nature of co-existence in crisis-riddled terrains.

Hansjörg Dilger, Maren Wirth, and Kristina Mashimi introduce the reflexive concept of *Affective Engagements* as a way to analyze the dynamic positionality of anthropological research in contexts of activist movements and socio-political struggles. Drawing on a case

study of their 2023 “We Want Them Back” symposium on the restitution of human remains from colonial contexts in Berlin, the authors explore how activists foster social and political transformation through shared affective orientations and dissonances. They reflexively draw on their own experience to examine how ethnographic researchers engage—or deliberately refrain from engaging—with research participants in their socio-political locations and expressed aims. In a tour de force combining theory, methodological reflection, and participatory observation, the team integrates insights from phenomenology, affect theory, and engaged anthropology to highlight the importance of reflexivity in politicized research contexts. In a more theoretical key, an interdisciplinary team consisting of Aletta Diefenbach, Matthias Lüthjohann, and Hans Roth probes how the legacies of critical theories and scholarly modes of critique shape *Affects of Critique*. Considering both scholarship on the sociology of critique as well as the distinctively non-critical, but rather “reparative” or appreciative orientation of the early turn to affect (Sedgwick, 1997), the authors offer a systematic perspective on the embodied, relational, and situated character of practices of critique. By no means opposed to critique, the authors show that affect is in fact front and center in practices of critique—it informs, instigates, galvanizes, and sensitizes these practices. According to them, critique emerges from affect, critique’s forms and practices are affective, and critique itself affects, by wielding a transformative power that goes beyond what Habermas once called the “forceless force” of rational argument.

Anyone who has ever wondered why critique, affective or not, might fail to make inroads into social formations and individual orientations might find Fabian Bernhardt’s chapter on *Affective Stasis* instructive. Drawing on the ancient Greek concept, Bernhardt describes a paradoxical condition characterized by the co-presence of extreme tension and an arresting immobility. Affective stasis combines a paralyzing stuckness, inhibition, or block with an underlying tension that has the potential to erupt into sudden violent conflict, upsetting a previous state of tenuous political balance. Bernhardt traces the ancient Greek sensitivity toward this process, but also grounds his insights in present-day experiences of societal disruption, arrested temporality, and personal immobility during the COVID-19 lockdowns—showing how stasis offers a lens for analyzing how affective arrangements can freeze embodied actors into modes of psychosocial standstill. Henrike Kohpeiß operates on a similar broad societal plane with her concept of *Unfeeling*: the non-accidental lack of collective affective responses to objects or situations that would merit robust affective engagement, such as the global ecological crisis. Kohpeiß uses the tools of a decolonial critical theory to analyze collective conditions of disaffection as the result of deliberate efforts of societal factions in the Global North to prolong the profitable status quo of fossil capitalism. She shows how the “imperial mode of living” (Brand & Wissen, 2021) mobilizes an array of sociopolitical and discursive strategies to produce repertoires of curbed, deflected, or repressed affectivity, whose cumulative effect can lead to a derealization of the ecological crisis and its consequences. Affect theory here reaches a crucial threshold: it shifts from the study of everyday affective relations toward a terrain in which affect is a resource, either for taking stock of reality or for denying it. The dominant conflict is no longer a clash of orientations but a struggle over the very parameters of an inhabitable world—a struggle that, for progressive actors, amounts to a clash with a reactionary politics of unreality in defense of a suicidal status quo.

The first *Key Concepts* volume as well as this second installment showcase the research carried out at the Berlin-based Collaborative Research Center *Affective Societies*. Both books feature conceptual work that has inspired research in the Center during the almost 12 years

it was funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). This has always involved researchers from within the Center as well as international collaborations with colleagues who provided external and alternative perspectives on the Center's research. Our intention for the chapters in the sixth thematic part is to highlight and emphasize these perspectives and open up potential future avenues for affect and emotion research, probing paths that have remained less explored by the Center's core faculty, but that provide a novel, critical, and stimulating impetus, potentially prefiguring future work. The chapters assembled in this final section are less about specific concepts, than about offering broader perspectives on affect and emotion. These perspectives showcase the potential of affect theory to shape more general takes on embodiment, emphasize how emotions can help us understand social change, and explore the limits of Western affect-centric approaches for coming to terms with the troubling conditions of the Anthropocene.

Donovan O. Schaefer's chapter *Affect as Method: Against the Numb View of Embodiment* suggests that embodiment can point the way toward a richer understanding of affect, and that, conversely, the vocabulary of feeling, affect, and emotion are needed to truly comprehend the relationships between embodied subjects and formations of power. The sociology of emotions has developed several theories addressing socially situated affect and emotion, and Marci D. Cottingham integrates and demarcates these from other approaches in her chapter *Studying (Neo-)Emotion Practices in Affect and Emotion Research*. Using her practice-based perspective on emotion and affect, she probes three areas of future research: misfeeling and misrecognition, deviance and defiance, and the emergence of new emotion categories in response to broader dynamics of social change—what she calls, coining a novel concept, neo-emotions (see also Cottingham, 2024). To conclude the volume, Tamar Blickstein examines how the unfolding ecological catastrophe exposes the limitations of academic knowledge systems, especially in contexts marked by colonial histories of extractivism, dispossession, and exploitation. Blickstein, a cultural anthropologist who has done ethnographic research on settler-colonial agribusiness and deforestation in South America, engages Indigenous thought to understand how affect studies—despite their entanglement in racialized colonial discourses—might offer underutilized tools for rethinking ecological and epistemic crises.

Taken together, the three *Perspective* chapters present social and cultural affect and emotion theory at a crossroads. On the one hand, they demonstrate the ongoing generative potential of established perspectives and methods—even of now-familiar, much-debated notions such as embodiment and social change. On the other hand, they convey a growing sense of crisis, impasse, and stagnation in how affect theory has been taken up within the Western academy. As a way forward, these chapters outline a timely task for affect theory: to remain grounded in its traditional strengths while productively transforming itself. This involves incorporating novel conceptual resources and sensuous registers, thereby expanding its sociohistorical sensitivity. At the same time, the chapters call on affect theory to return to its roots—by reactivating the energies and untapped potentials of local lifeworlds and everyday sociality.

Outlook

The ground covered between the outrage politics of Trump and Vance catering to a rapid-reaction online culture, the Vietnamese carescapes of the city of Berlin, and Maasai

communities challenging “restitution” is tremendous. Similarly vast is the conceptual space between emotion politics and emotional reflexivity on the one hand, and home feelings, haunting, and sensory care on the other. Much of the power of the conceptual tools assembled in *The New Key Concepts in Affective Societies* stems from their shared assumption of affective relationality as a common ground. They have been derived from a broad variety of themes and backgrounds and can be mobilized to investigate a diverse range of empirical fields, sites, and cases.

This breadth reflects the fact that individuals and collectives always partake in both broader macro-political dynamics *and* local spheres of belonging. The modalities of participation might be different, but the effects on the lives of those involved are equally massive: the machinations of macro-politics subject individuals to wide-ranging effects, often with consequences for their well-being and life chances, which can linger for generations. Homely spheres of belonging, local networks of practice, and mutual care might provide shelter and protection from the whims of grand-scale politics, supply meaning and purpose, and compensate for systemic deficits in provisioning care or safety. However, the home is by no means a sanctuary, as indicated by statistics on domestic and sexual partner violence (Banet-Weiser & Higgins, 2023; Dwyer, 2022), and by tensions in transgenerational family dynamics (Röttger-Rössler & Lam, 2018). A protective sphere of local involvement might also shield individuals from insights into global dynamics and also from their complicity in systems of extraction and exploitation (Rothberg, 2019; Shotwell, 2016). This means that the study of affect and emotion is tasked with navigating tensions and hidden dynamics that might contradict surface appearances. Scholars may need to curb the temptation to positively value certain practices, experiences, or modes of involvement in the face of troubling tendencies that may not be readily apparent.

There is also a more general tension surrounding the issue of violence, exploitation, and oppression within contemporary arrangements of living. The concepts we use—the theoretical resources affect and emotion theorists draw on—are mostly reflective of Western experiential and intellectual perspectives, largely beholden to Western traditions of scholarship and knowledge production. As such, these concepts may be ill-equipped to grapple with the orientations, experiential worlds, and sense-making of those frequently left out of such traditions—including Indigenous peoples and their descendants, and many in the Global South more generally. This is not a straightforward matter, after all, as affect theory, thanks to its Euro-modern inheritance, might be singularly apt to explore “how capitalism feels” (Berlant, 2011; Cvetkovich, 2012) and how partaking in extractive, oppressive, and structurally violent regimes is lived concretely and dealt with affectively (Kohpeiß, 2025). That being said, the type of scholarship characteristic of affect theory will inevitably harbor limitations that reflect colonial legacies and the limited positionalities of, for the most part, affluent regions of the world.

As Tamar Blickstein argues in the chapter that concludes this volume, an awareness of colonial affect can help researchers gain insight into the drivers of the climate catastrophe, especially at sites of multispecies attachment at the frontlines of ecological destruction. Blickstein notes affect’s under-explored capacity to bypass the academic hierarchies often imposed on ontological worlds—hierarchies that have historically dismissed or ignored the ontologies of the colonized. A serious attention to Indigenous conceptions of relationality—such as the Qom concept of *qadma*, or territory—can help guide affect theorists to rethink what affective concepts can be and do in a time of ecological crisis. *Qadma* might truly be a

“key” concept, as it can set us on a path to a differently configured landscape of scholarship on affect. It may reinvigorate the methodological point of our endeavor: to craft concepts that work as affective formations—concise, intense, illuminating, and inextricable from the territories and experiences most characteristic of our troubled times.

Notes

- 1 Amanpour’s spoken commentary on the scene, recorded at today’s message length limit of 90 seconds, is little more than a bonus track for the die-hards. Not surprisingly, her commentary also bustles with ostentatious affectivity. <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/28/us/video/christiane-amanpour-trump-zelensky-digvid> (accessed on July 13, 2025).
- 2 <https://www.bild.de/politik/inland/linken-chef-van-aken-kritisiert-gruene-als-besserverdiener-partei-67b72fb719756d1c4d18c899> (accessed July 13, 2025).
- 3 <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/05/politics/elon-musk-rogan-interview-empathy-doge/index.html> (accessed March 12, 2025).

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24 The New Key Concepts in Affective Societies

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