

# 4 A Political Grammar of Feelings

## Thinking the Political Through Sensitivity and Sentimentality

*Brigitte Bargetz*

### 1. Introduction

Politics “no longer relies on principles, truth, etc. It is only concerned with making use of feelings for political means and imbuing them with a sense of the political” (Haslinger 1995, 51, author’s translation). It may come as a surprise that this quote by Austrian writer Josef Haslinger is not about contemporary times. His diagnosis references the Austrian presidential elections in 1986, which Kurt Waldheim, who had been a member of the SA Cavalry Corps, won. According to Haslinger, Waldheim’s success, despite the public debates concerning his Nazi past, shows a flattening of politics that gives way to the emergence of a novel “politics of feelings.” This politics does more than merely organize people’s feelings; it also aims to direct people’s thoughts toward certain feelings (*ibid.*, 50f.).<sup>1</sup>

About 30 years later, quite similar critiques are being uttered. Since the vote on Brexit, Trump’s victory at the polls, and the talk about a politics of post-truth, a vibrant yet worried debate on the risks and dangers of affective politics has emerged. In this debate, different voices address a looming irrationality as symptomatic of an increase in (right-wing) populism and authoritarianism. Consequently, some caution against a politics of feelings and argue for a return to political reason. As Silke van Dyk (2017, 347, author’s translation) has recently observed, “The current rise in the popularity of the right is . . . read as a crisis of facticity, as a post-truth era, as a new economy of lies, and indeed as a threat to the relationship between democracy and truth, which the liberal faction so emphatically advocates.”

Political theory and philosophy have long since neglected affect and feelings in politics. Presumably, this has both political and theoretical reasons. The disavowal of affect and feelings in Western modern political thought is based on a predominantly liberal conception of politics that is associated with rationality, objectivity, interests, progress, and the public. This narrow understanding of politics has hugely been critiqued by feminist and postcolonial scholarship. These scholars have pointed out

that it is but one articulation within a whole set of dichotomies within Western modernity and have skillfully demonstrated the political significance of feelings (e.g., Frye 1983; Jaggar 1989; Gatens 1995; McClintock 1995; Berlant 1997; Prokhorovnik 1999; Sauer 1999; Ahmed 2004; Stoler 2004). They have shown that feelings have been politically devalued and delegitimized and that this discrediting – which is usually tied to gender, sexuality, race, and class – has been mobilized to justify and fortify the Western capitalist heteronormative nation-state. Against this background, feminist and postcolonial scholarship has called upon the necessity to acknowledge the political impact of feelings and to rehabilitate feelings in politics.

However, in view of the contemporary critiques of affective politics as significant modes of right-wing populism and authoritarianism, what can these feminist and postcolonial claims tell us? Does the call for reason and rationality ultimately imply that these accounts are a “historical fallacy” (Sauer 2001, 5, author’s translation)? Have feminist and postcolonial efforts to carve out the affective dimensions of politics become obsolete when confronted with calls for rationality, which in turn prove liberal theory’s triumph in terms of thinking about democracy?

In my contribution, I argue for an understanding of affective politics that exceeds the debate on whether affects and feelings in politics are intrinsically good or bad, enabling or disabling, productive or dangerous, democratic or un-democratic. Such oppositions, I claim, are limiting. They run the risk of insinuating a universal understanding of affect and of reiterating the liberal fiction of rational politics void of feelings. Countering right-wing populism and authoritarianism by calling for purely rational politics is dangerous not only because it ultimately leaves the realm of feelings to right-wing populists. It also blatantly disregards how liberalism, and even more so neoliberalism, have substantially been invested in affective governing (e.g., Stoler 2004; Sauer and Penz 2017; Bargetz 2019). Indeed, in terms of affective politics, the neoliberal project is less the opposite of (right-wing) populism and more its precursor.

In order to circumvent a liberal juxtaposition here, I develop a “political grammar of feelings”<sup>2</sup> that – building on Sara Ahmed (2004, 4) – seeks to interrogate what affects and feelings (can) politically *do* instead of finding an answer to what they *are*. Speaking of a political *grammar* of feelings does not imply a narrow or linguistic notion of grammar but invokes the grammatical noun-verb distinction as a crucial figure to bring into view two interrelated modes of the political, namely feeling(s), as both tools and ways of doing. Particularly, I engage with sensitivity and sentimentality, which I consider as expressions and modes of a Western modern understanding of the political. For developing these political notions of sensitivity and sentimentality, I draw on Ann Cvetkovich’s and Lauren Berlant’s work. Both contest the political exclusion of feelings within liberal theories and (neo-)liberal democracies and explore the

political and, in particular, the heteronormative and racist implications of mobilizing affect.

## 2. Situating Sensitivity and Sentimentality: Affect, Politics, and the Affective Turn

Within phenomenology, notions of affect, emotion, sensation, and intensity have always played an important role (Landweer and Renz 2008; Szanto and Landweer 2019). Recently, some even witnessed a “phenomenological turn” in the philosophy of emotions (Thonhauser 2018, 1001). Phenomenology also matters for what has come to be known as the “affective turn” (Clough and Halley 2007; Koivunen 2010). Interrogating the “timing of affect,” Marie-Luise Angerer, Bernd Bösel, and Michaela Ott (2014) have identified the affective turn as also bringing about a revival of the “phenomenological tradition” (*ibid.*, 7). Similarly, in their widely acknowledged introduction to affect theory, Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth have noted that phenomenological and post-phenomenological ideas about embodiment are an important strand in contemporary affect theory (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, 6). Feminist and queer affect studies have turned to phenomenology in work that considers the subject (of feminism) both as embodied and beyond a merely constructivist approach (Ahmed and Stacey 2001; Koivunen 2010). One might even say that the turn to affect reconfigures the earlier dispute between phenomenology and poststructuralism, or, as Anu Koivunen notes, “phenomenology meets poststructuralism” (*ibid.*, 13). The critique of a discursive notion of affect, the desire to bring the material living body “back in”, and the insistence on felt experiences of the everyday within the affective turn clearly resonate with phenomenology’s conception of experiences, embodied beings in the world, and embodied subjectivity. From this vantage point, it is not surprising that Linda M. G. Zerilli (2015, 281) criticizes certain approaches both in affect theory and phenomenology for sharing a similar problem, namely, the implicit risk to oppose embodied coping and affect to cognition and thus to render it difficult to imagine political resistance and agency.

Sara Ahmed comes from a different angle as she emphasizes the deep impact of phenomenology on affect studies. She refers to the “importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness” as well as to the “role repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds” play (Ahmed 2006, 49). In her own work that broadly engages with the role emotions play in power relations from a feminist and critical race perspective, Ahmed takes up phenomenology’s concern with the “intentionality about things” and supplements it with an understanding of being “affected by things” (Ahmed 2004, 209). Consequently, she speaks of “emotions as orientation” (*ibid.*, 231) for theorizing emotions both as being oriented toward objects and of being

affective themselves and therefore in contact with objects. For Jan Slaby, her approach toward affect is exemplary of what he calls – following Johanna Oksala – a post-phenomenological critical philosophy (Slaby 2016, 286). Post-phenomenology, Oksala (2016) explains, explicitly attends to the imbrication of experiences and social conditions.

In developing my idea of an affective politics of sensitivity and sentimentality here, I am indebted to Ahmed's theory of affect in at least two ways: First, because it emphasizes the co-constitution of the social and the personal and, second, because of her specific approach to emotions. I delve deeper into these two aspects in the following where I also flesh out my understanding of the political.

Speaking of affective politics in terms of sentimentality and sensitivity, I am interested in the structural and the subjective and their critical and powerful entanglements. This interest, of course, resonates with the well-known feminist slogan of “The Personal is Political!” that dates back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, as much as it echoes the longstanding feminist critique of the public/private dichotomy (Pateman 1989). A major concern the slogan addressed was the tendency to frame gendered discrimination and violence as a personal problem and to show that they are, in fact, embedded in social structures. Consequently, politicizing the personal was not about individual help and support but about bringing about social change. Decades later, in 2001, the slogan was rearticulated by the Public Feelings Project established by a group of critical scholars – including Lauren Berlant and Ann Cvetkovich – along with activists and artists based in the U.S. The project's aim was to capture liberalism and neo-liberalism in their affective guises and to find novel ways of political mobilizing and agency. Their slogan “Depressed? It might be political,” embraced the earlier feminist mantra, and further emphasized, as Cvetkovich claims, that “despite a widespread therapeutic culture” feelings “still haven't gone public enough” (Cvetkovich 2012a, 15).

Even as it [the Public Feelings Project] takes up from the familiar left position that feelings and the therapeutic institutions that address them must ultimately have a political horizon and lead to social transformation, it also seeks to move past some of the impasses that have resulted from critiques of therapy and affective politics, which often subsume feeling under the rubric of politics. It opens anew the question of how to embrace emotional responses as part of social justice projects.

(*ibid.*, 109)

Along with this feminist framing of politics and feelings, there is another debate that is of interest to my approach. Recently, there have been discussions about what makes affect a political issue. Thomas Bedorf (2015) refers to the distinction between politics and the political, the so-called

political difference (Marchart 2007), which, as he argues, allows one to criticize a liberal notion of politics and to re-conceptualize the relation between politics and feelings. For Bedorf, feelings are not political *per se* but can become political, provided that three criteria are met: The moment of activation, when feelings become mobilizing; the moment of community formation, when feelings are collectively shared; and the moment of articulation, meaning that affects are not simply translated into the cognitive but also need to be articulated within the symbolic order (*ibid.*, 250–264). Equally, Jonas Bens and Jan Slaby take up the political difference as an analytical framework and make use of both aspects, “politics” and “the political,” for their understanding of “political affect” (Slaby and Bens 2019, 340). Affect’s ontological proximity to “the political,” they claim, ascribes to a philosophical understanding of political affect. It largely draws on Spinoza’s reading of affect as an ability to affect and to be affected and emphasizes “affects of allegiance” (*ibid.*, 340). On the contrary, “affect in politics” describes the very concrete sphere of governing and political struggles and how they integrate or rely on affects.

Translating the political difference into theorizing political affect is appealing because, similar to feminist concerns, it allows us to move beyond a narrow (liberal) notion of politics and to include affective aspects and modalities that, so far, have often been ignored in political theory. Still, this is only the case as long as “politics” and “the political” are considered as related without favoring an ontological understanding of political affect and simultaneously renders affective political struggles of secondary importance. In this vein, the political grammar of feelings proposed here situates affect and emotion, feeling and sensation, sensitivity and sentimentality within the social and political. This reading of affective politics seems, in some way, close to John Protevi’s (2009) call to “political affect.” For Protevi, affect is always already both social and corporeal, it is the mutual “imbrication of the social and the somatic,” since “bodies change in relation to the changing situations in which they find themselves” (Protevi 2009, xiv). This is why he underscores the political shaping and sociopolitical and historical embeddedness of affective politics. “[W]e make our worlds in making sense of situations, but we do so only on the basis of the worlds in which we find ourselves” (*ibid.*, 35). Similarly, to suggest a political grammar of feelings, I wish to reconceptualize the imbrication of the personal and the public, of embodied experiences and political and economic structures, of the psychic, the bodily, and the social. In order to do so, my approach does not follow the strand of affect theory that considers affect and sensation primarily to be an asocial intensity or energy beyond the subject, which builds on Brian Massumi’s work (2002). Instead, I emphasize modes of affective perception, embodied sensations, and psychic experiences and trace how affect and feelings (can) operate politically.

### 3. Political Sensitivity

“What if depression, in the Americas at least, could be traced to histories of colonialism, genocide, slavery, legal exclusion, and everyday segregation and isolation that haunt all of our lives, rather than to biochemical imbalances?” (Cvetkovich 2012a, 115) This is Ann Cvetkovich’s provocative and “speculative” (ibid., 24) question which guides her recent work on depression. She aims to grasp depression not only as a personal or individual “problem” in a medical, clinical sense but, similar to Alain Ehrenberg’s (2010) sociopolitical reading of depression, argues that depression also be understood as a social and political phenomenon, a “public feeling” (Cvetkovich 2012a, 24), and therefore as a “political experience” (see the introduction to this volume). Her argument, however, certainly does not deny the necessity of medical treatment or romanticize depression by turning it into a positive experience. Indeed, Cvetkovich writes that depression “retains its associations with inertia and despair, if not apathy and indifference, but these feelings, moods, and sensibilities become sites of publicity and community formation” (Cvetkovich 2012a, 2). In this manner, her understanding links up with the feminist demand to politicize the personal. This means going beyond both medicalization as a mode of individualizing and biology as the only explanation and solution to depression. By explicitly proposing a “racialized understanding of depression” (ibid., 121) she seeks to expand a materialistic understanding of racism as “state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of a group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (Gilmore quoted in Cvetkovich 2012a, 120) and emphasizes racism’s affective dimensions.

In order to develop my understanding of political sensitivity in the following, I build on Cvetkovich’s insights. Depression, she claims, “is ordinary” (Cvetkovich 2012a, 25). Arguing this way, Cvetkovich does not call upon some sort of “self-help culture” (Illouz 2007, 42) to remedy this contemporary political condition. Instead, she describes depression as a recurring mode of emotional exhaustion that marks relations of power and domination such as racism and colonialism and indicates how these are inscribed into people’s everyday practices and sensory registers. In contrast to a politics of trauma which addresses the horrors of the past as a universal human experience, political depression is not that which is spectacular, extraordinary, unique, or catastrophic but an everyday “low-level affect” (Cvetkovich 2012b, 134). By speaking of political depression, Cvetkovich draws attention to the habitualized, often taken-for-granted and thus nearly invisible forms of power. It is a perspective on the everyday as a recurring process of codifying and modifying (Bargetz 2016) that helps us understand how experiences and feelings are shaped, sedimented, and perpetuated within institutions and how they are conveyed through and embodied in everyday practices.

To assess the ordinariness of political depression, Cvetkovich conceives of racism neither as an event nor some supposedly “past” era of colonialism. As “the afterlife of slavery” (Cvetkovich 2012a, 126), political depression is inscribed in the wounded bodies and practices of contemporary societies, thus making forces of the past apprehensible through everyday feelings and sensations. Still, Cvetkovich admits that it is not easy to fully grasp the connections between today’s feelings and the violent experiences of the past, for “they might emerge as ghosts or feelings of hopelessness, rather than as scientific evidence or existing bodies of research or material forms of deprivation” (ibid.). Building on different archives, such as auto-ethnographic writings, scientific autobiographies, spiritual texts, and art projects, Cvetkovich also turns to Saidiya Hartman’s scholarly autobiography *Lose your Mother*, written from a Black Diaspora perspective to further explain this insight. *Lose your Mother* combines scientific investigation with personal memoirs and shows how colonialism, racism, and depression are mutually interwoven. When a white policeman stops 12-year-old Saidiya Hartman and her mother who unwittingly ran a red light, the girl shouts at the cop in a state of what Hartman retrospectively describes as “indignant rage” even “despite her mother’s fear of confrontation” (ibid., 130). The young girl’s reaction to this state authority articulates an affective legacy of the history of colonialism and institutional(ized) racism. It expresses, as Cvetkovich notes, “the underbelly of dreams of freedom and racial uplift and the emotional unconscious of a world that remains ‘ruled by the color line’” (ibid., 131). It reflects “an inability to trust white people” and “a tendency to assume the worst in any encounter with authority” (ibid., 131). The incident demonstrates how racism and colonialism are translated through “fear and suspicion” (ibid., 131) into the temporalities of the everyday.

Speaking of political sensitivity, I want to emphasize that the little girl’s expression is not only an individual feeling but one that is deeply embedded within the political conditions of the present and the past. The notion of political sensitivity here aims to highlight an understanding of affective legacies and that is the endurance of past power structures and how they (affectively) translate into the historical present. It is a way to acknowledge the disembodied ghosts of the colonial past as they materialize in everyday practices and affective reactions. History, Cvetkovich claims, “shapes even the most personal experience of the present” (2012a, 130). Political sensitivity indicates that the past enters as affective traces, written into the body’s affective registers and everyday practices. In this manner, affects are political because they are both shaped by the past and continue to shape the present. Affects are a mode of transportation and translation into the everyday. Traces of the past illustrate the corporeal-affective transmission of moods and intensities. Affects evoke and actualize the past and consequently make the past powerful within the present.



Yet affects are always articulated within historically-specific relations of power and domination.

Taking Cvetkovich's elaboration on racism and colonialism as a mode of political sensitivity also brings a very specific temporal dimension into play. The slogan "The Personal is Political!" highlighted that what is assumed to be personal is indeed a political expression and, more specifically, one of patriarchal gender relations. Cvetkovich's reflections can further show that the personal is also an expression of past political and economic structures. Affects articulate a connection between everyday feelings in the present and violent structures in the past – where even moments of violence matter that one did not experience personally. Affects like depression may not only point beyond the self but also beyond the present moment. Depression can therefore be read as a transindividual and historical force. It is a mode of political sensitivity, because it is also through depression that power relations can become sensible, visible, and sometimes even apparent. Political sensitivity, therefore, describes the affective articulation of political structures of the past and present. Still, it refers to connections between the past and the present without assuming a linear and determining understanding of these forces. Traces of the past articulate a non-representational understanding of temporality by indicating a "having-become" and by therefore apprehending the present as a historical present. Thinking through affective traces of the past can help identify (some) present (power) relations – although this should be understood neither as exclusive nor as the preferred mode of knowledge.

Theorizing political sensitivity in this way means that depression can be both indicative of and a signal for relations of power and domination. Embodied feelings like depression can indicate that and how power and domination "get under your skin" (Ahmed 2010, 216) historically and transindividually. Thus, the materiality of power relations is also affectively inscribed in people's bodies and embodied practices. Everyday experiences and feelings are not disconnected from relations of power and domination but also become intelligible as aspects of these relations. While political sensitivity might be taken as an expression of a subject – and therefore appear to be a personal experience – it does indeed extend beyond the individual. Political sensitivity, then, is a mode of affective perception that is both part of and the very expression of complex and complicated social structures.

Following this, political sensitivity also refers to the possibility to gain further insight into political conditions. Everyday feelings indicate that wider social structures, such as institutionalized violence, are expressed in the "small dramas" (Cvetkovich 2007, 464) of the everyday. Feeling bad or depressed can eventually also serve as an "entry point on to political life" (Cvetkovich 2012b, 132). To think about depression also as political depression may offer knowledge about and insight into power relations and structures of inequality and, therefore, following



Cvetkovich's reading, racism, colonialism, and slavery. It allows us to learn about how histories of power and violence shape the historical present, without, however, claiming that this knowledge is necessarily politically activating or mobilizing. Still, highlighting that something has been shaped politically and is not only a result of a chemical reaction, may be politically moving. It may encourage people, bring them together, and may ultimately lead to political mobilization – as I discuss further later. It may become a political entry point, since these insights gained through affective perception may also orient people toward changing ongoing political conditions.

Speaking of political sensitivity in this manner describes an embodied and bodily affective register. Taking depression as a political and social phenomenon implies a mode of sensation, perception, and agency through which social and historical structures may both be realized and rendered intelligible. Depression constitutes a way of (embodied tacit) knowing through feeling. In this sense, the notion of political sensitivity does not rely upon differentiating “intentional emotions” from “automatic physical responses and non-intentional sensations,” as for instance in Alison Jaggar's bridging of “love and knowledge” (Jaggar 1989, 154) or on a differentiation between intentional “emotional feelings” and “nonemotional feelings” (Döring 2009, 14, author's translation). Instead, I highlight affective knowledge as embodied everyday knowledge, thus building on Linda M. G. Zerilli's claim to rethink Gilbert Ryle's well-known differentiation between “knowing how” and “knowing that” in a sense that, ultimately, considers “affect and cognition” as “radically entangled” (Zerilli 2015, 282). Affects transport and translate power and domination into everyday practices. To consider affective knowledge as one way of gaining insights into relations of power and domination, then, can (also) help bring to light how racism, colonialism, and exploitation affectively materialize within the everyday and how people affectively cope with these relations of power and domination. In this vein, emphasizing political sensitivity expands a notion of power by integrating its affective operations. It means considering how political relations are affectively accepted, rejected, or reinterpreted.

The notion of political sensitivity addresses bodily affective registers and, therefore, comprises an understanding of affective legacy, affective perception, and affective knowledge. There are, however, a few more questions to bear in mind in view of this notion. Emphasizing a political sensitivity following Cvetkovich's approach offers a way to grasp forces of the past through everyday feelings and embodied practices. Yet, to explain how this “transmission of affect” (Brennan 2004) precisely works would require further theorizing. One question could be which relations of power and domination are decisive and to what extent political sensitivities are socially shaped. The question especially arises in the face of different forms of power and exploitation, let alone their entanglement,

and how they are inscribed in people's embodied practices of the everyday. Cvetkovich is not alone with her concern to politicize depression. Like Ehrenberg, Mark Fisher, too, emphasizes the political dimension of depression by focusing on neoliberal conditions. In the presence of "capitalist realism" Fisher observes a "a correlation between rising rates of mental distress and the neoliberal mode of capitalism practiced in countries like Britain, the USA and Australia" (Fisher 2009, 19), which leads him to claim: "The task of repoliticizing mental illness is an urgent one if the left wants to challenge capitalist realism" (*ibid.*, 37). Cvetkovich (2012a, 11) also remarks on the connection between depression and neoliberalism when she writes: "Depression, or alternative accounts of what gets called depression, is thus a way to describe neoliberalism and globalization, or the current state of political economy, in affective terms." In view of these insights on neoliberalism's account of depression, what are the consequences for theorizing political sensitivity that, as I have suggested, refers to depression as a racialized political phenomenon? It is indeed important to highlight that speaking of political sensitivity does not imply the ability to detect specific individual causes, neither does it suggest the opposite, namely that neoliberalism and/or colonialism necessarily result in depression. Rather, it allows one to grasp complex and multiple social forces as part of the depressive condition of the historical present and, therefore, depression also needs to be acknowledged for undoing these relations.

A further question arises concerning the political effects of political sensitivity. As Cvetkovich emphasizes: "Saying that capitalism (or colonialism or racism) is the problem does not help me get up in the morning" (Cvetkovich 2012a, 15). To what extent, if at all, is this mode of political sensitivity linked to political agency, (collective) political resistance, and accountability? How can political organizing be based on such forms of knowing through feeling? How might depression, as a political entry point, ultimately turn into political action? The latter is an important question for Cvetkovich, too. She refuses the option of finding an easy answer when she emphasizes that there are "no magic bullet solutions, whether medical or political, just the slow steady work of resilient survival, utopian dreaming, and other affective tools for transformation" (*ibid.*, 2). Although I agree with Cvetkovich about the impossibility of "magic bullet points," by mainly referring to the minor affective tools of transformation, she risks falling short in terms of her own claims when she considers depression a political feeling and more explicitly an expression of power and inequality. Depression as political sensitivity describes a mode and a moment, even of rupture, through which injustice and domination are eventually mediated and articulated as well as become visible. Specifically, because global capitalism increasingly shapes the affective everyday, it is of utmost importance to analyze and criticize these imbrications – also in terms of further thinking about larger structural changes.

#### 4. Political Sentimentality

Arguing that affect both translates and articulates relations of power and domination might suggest that affect is the privileged mode of political perception and recognition and therefore might overemphasize the force of affect. Yet, as outlined in the beginning, the political grammar of feelings that I am elaborating here aims to go beyond understanding affect as either good or bad. Instead, I draw attention to what affect and feelings politically do, and to the scopes and sites where these processes unfold. The notion of political sentimentality I develop in the following also articulates social conditions, albeit in terms of individualization, desolidarization, and depoliticization. Here, I draw on Lauren Berlant's work and specifically on her multilayered notion of national sentimentality. This notion is based on her observation of a specific form of affective politics in which people engage with the world through affect and desires as much as through cognition and ideology (Berlant 2008, x).

Speaking of political sentimentality, I build on Berlant's discussion of painful feelings, suffering, and trauma, which she perceives as founding principles for the U.S. nation state and more explicitly citizenship. A "trumping power of suffering stories" (Berlant 2000, 34), she explains, became established in U.S. history, which rendered suffering the "true core of national collectivity" (Berlant 1999, 53) and made struggles for participation subject to the condition of having experienced injuries. Berlant identifies such expressions of the political even in the feminist, workers', and abolition movements of the 19th century, "since abolition and suffrage worked to establish the enslaved Other as someone with subjectivity, defined not as someone who thinks or works, but as someone who has endured violence intimately" (Berlant 2000, 34). Such "cultural politics of pain" (*ibid.*, 33) are also evident in the Supreme Court's stance on the right to abortion, which is based on the "suffering" and "undue burden" of "heterosexual femininity" (*ibid.*, 40) but not on the right to one's own body. This politics inscribes pain and suffering in the political and legal registers by fetishizing wounds as "proof" of identity, thereby subordinating other cognitive and political modes to this regime of pain. Such a sentimental politics runs the risk of evoking victimization and breaking up marginalized positions into hierarchies of pain by inciting, as Berlant writes, "competitions over whose lives have been more excluded from the 'happiness' that is constitutionally promised by national life" (*ibid.*, 32).

In this manner, political sentimentality indicates a mode of individualization, depoliticization, and de-solidarization that I would like to call a politics of recognition, or more precisely a politics of affective recognition. For Nancy Fraser (2005), collective (feminist) struggles are problematic, if they were merely struggles for recognition and not equally for distribution and representation. Her notion of a politics of recognition,

then, allows us to capture Berlant's critique of national sentimentality as a politics that provides a moral safeguard for the privileged under the guise of empathy.

Presented as a collective refusal to bear any longer a population's collective suffering, public sentimentality is too often a defensive response by people who identify with privilege, yet fear they will be exposed as immoral by their tacit sanction of a particular structural violence that benefits them.

(Berlant 2000, 33)

I consider this a mode of individualizing affective recognition because it ultimately assumes a defensive, self-centered politics of guilt. Taking my cue from Audre Lorde (1984), guilt is a particular, inward-oriented feeling. It is "another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication" (ibid., 130). Guilt mainly points to the person itself, to "one's own actions or lack of action" (ibid., 130). As such, guilt does not suggest structural change but instead passivizes and individualizes, making it unsuitable for emancipatory politics. Such political sentimentality also tends to appropriate the feelings of others. Berlant brings this to the fore when she critically remarks that "the pain of intimate others burns into the conscience of classically privileged national subjects, such that they feel the pain of flawed or denied citizenship as their pain" (Berlant 1999, 53). Here, the perception and attention shift from the injuries of the subaltern to the painful sensations or wounds of the privileged. Political sensitivity and affective agency are guaranteed, first and foremost, for those who express empathy but not for those they initially empathize with. Those in privileged positions thereby ignore, silence, or even erase the suffering subjects, while keeping their own supremacy and privilege intact. Political sentimentality replaces the question of social transformation with what Berlant calls a "passive and vaguely civic-minded ideal of compassion" (Berlant 2008, 41). It entails and encourages the view that "a nation can best be built across fields of social difference through channels of affective identification and empathy" (Berlant 2000, 34). Empathy is articulated here in a way that does not seek to engage in political struggles via solidary or collective demands for socio-economic participation. At best, such sentimental politics foster patronizing discourses of rescue and promote private welfare and charity (Bargetz and Sauer 2015) and feed into legitimizing and compensating for the state's withdrawal of social rights and the neoliberal dismantling of the welfare state.

Finally, speaking of political sentimentality, I would like to highlight a politics of promise. On the one hand, pain and suffering are considered entry points into the fabric of the nation-state, as the politics of pain described earlier has shown. On the other hand, national sentimentality is also based on "the foggy fantasy of happiness" (Berlant 2000, 36),

promising a politics that ultimately goes far beyond pain: “The object of the nation-state,” Berlant attests, “is to eradicate systemic social pain, the absence of which becomes the definition of freedom” (ibid., 35). Happiness and painlessness constitute an implicit norm within the sentimental nation-state, as much as they operate as a basis for the nation-state’s legitimacy and as an affective-ideological appeal through the power of promise. In this vein, the image of a national or nation-forming consensus is established and propagated, creating a supposedly coherent “feel-good state” that is situated outside political struggles and state violence. This consensus is certainly a precarious one, since it not only renders differences and relations of domination invisible but also instates consensus and political harmony as the ultimate democratic condition. Finally, understanding political sentimentality as a mode of governing promises articulates a future-oriented, yet currently unrealizable, hope for a “better” life. It is a rhetoric of promise – of participation, belonging, well-being, prosperity, happiness, protection, and security – where changing the present is “sacrificed” for the hope of a better future. As such, it also creates a consensus regarding specific commitments and conditions, including those of inequality.

## 5. A Political Grammar of Feelings

Theorizing affective politics in terms of political sensitivity and political sentimentality contests the liberal notion of the political because it dismisses the liberal idea of (purely) rational politics and instead challenges the Western modern dichotomy of political rationality versus personal emotionality. As Lauren Berlant explains, too, “Feelings are not the opposite of thought: each is an embodied rhetorical register associated with specific practices, times, and spaces of appropriateness” (Berlant 2005, 47). Both modes of affective politics, political sensitivity and political sentimentality, articulate a form of politicizing the personal and private, yet in different ways, as I explore further later. In both modes, relations of power and domination are crucial: In terms of how people are affected, how they affectively orient themselves within and cope with relations of power and domination, and how these relations are affectively maintained and transmitted. Understanding the political through sensitivity and sentimentality does not imply a narrow scope of politics in terms of the public or the state; it also conceives of the political as located in people’s everyday practices and bodily feelings. These two modes of political sensitivity and sentimentality make up what I suggest calling a “political grammar of feelings,”<sup>3</sup> thus bringing into view two interrelated modalities of the political. On the one hand, I consider *feeling* to be a sensory register, as one – although not the only – mode of sensation, perception, cognition, and agency which I call *feeling politics*. I distinguish this

affective political mode, on the other hand, from *feelings* as instruments and means of the political, which I call a politics of feelings.

Speaking about *political sensitivity* as a mode of *feeling politics*, I emphasize that “to feel” and “feelings” are both indications and expressions of political conditions. Affect and emotions are not simply apolitical, irrelevant, or irrational, as the “liberal dispositive of separation” (Sauer 1999, author’s translation) between politics and feelings suggests. Rather, relations of power and domination are also felt or affectively perceived within the temporalities of the everyday. Political conditions, such as colonialism, racism, and capitalism, are (also) expressed within and through processes of feeling. *Feeling politics* seeks to theorize affect as a transindividual and historical force, as a mode in which relations of power and dominations translate into the embodied practices of the everyday and in which these conditions become visible or sensible. *Feeling politics* does not privilege rationality and objectivity but examines how power circulates through feelings. However, emphasizing that politics and power are also felt does not mean that feelings are the only or preferred mode of cognition and knowledge. Consequently, *feeling politics* does not imply that there is such a thing as “true feelings.”

*Feeling politics* is neither per se emancipatory nor necessarily an individualized, depoliticized mode of the political. Precisely because feelings are also effects of politics, political sensitivity does not locate feelings beyond but rather within the realm of power relations and social structures. *Feeling politics* points to the idea that political and economic conditions are affectively absorbed, solidified, and interrogated. From this vantage point, politics does not exclusively take place on the lofty plane of state politics above people’s heads but affectively unfolds in people’s everyday practices. Taking this mode of feeling seriously as a potential for political sensation, perception, cognition, and agency makes it possible to incorporate affect and affective knowledge into theorizing power relations, and also allows for a rethinking and opening up of new spaces of transformation through moments of affective disruption.

*Political sentimentality* is the notion I use to explore how feelings such as pain, suffering, vulnerability, or empathy can also be made productive for hegemonic purposes; it is a mode that I call a politics of feelings. Political sentimentality illustrates a governing through feelings, for instance, through individualization and depoliticization or by producing consent. It helps unveil the mystification inherent in postdemocratic politics of consensus (Rancière 1999) and to grasp consensus as an (affective) mode of safeguarding and legitimizing hegemonic politics. Even though a politics of feelings points to an activity or practice, too, it shifts the focus from sensory registers toward acknowledging affects as instruments and means of the political. By conceptualizing a politics of feelings, I seek to emphasize that power and politics work through feelings. In this manner,

affective politics can indicate how differences and exclusions are legitimated, maintained, or publicly orchestrated explicitly through feelings. The perspective of a politics *of* feelings thus opens up an analysis and critique of manifold political hierarchies and hierarchizations, which are produced and managed through affect and emotions. This also enables a critical examination of hegemonic scripts of feeling or so-called “feeling rules” (Hochschild 1983, 56). Obviously, this mode of affective politics does not only interrogate the liberal separation of politics and feelings but also shows how this interrelation might fuel a (neo-)liberal logic of the political. Political sentimentality indicates that some politics include feelings but under (neo-)liberal signs. The notion of a politics *of* feelings should make visible such modes that operate and govern through affect.

Certainly, a politics *of* feelings does not need to be confined to the idea of feelings to be appropriated, as my elaborations on political sentimentality suggest. Affects do not necessarily need to be instruments of devaluation, exclusion, and domination. Rather, the perspective of a politics *of* feelings also allows affects to be understood as a way of mobilizing politics and as a political force that makes it possible to interrogate conditions of inequality and oppression. A politics *of* feelings therefore also refers to feelings in an emancipatory sense. Affects can both incite agency as well as passivize, which raises the question of how to direct political sentimentality toward becoming emancipatory affective politics. Put differently, what are the necessary conditions to prevent the political mode of affective sensation, perception, and cognition from resulting in a sentimental “oppression Olympics” (Martínez 1998) or an equally sentimental and consensual “feel-good-politics” but instead leading in a dissensual (Rancière 1999) yet solidary politics? How can political sensitivity become the (affective) starting point for political disputes and collective political struggles? How can these socially articulated and simultaneously personally felt expressions of politics and power be transformed into collective emancipatory practices?

The two logics of feeling politics and a politics *of* feeling are closely interwoven. The feeling of politics, which means feeling as a mode of sensation, perception, cognition, and agency, can also become the means and motive of politics or feelings as an instrument. Depression can be an affective mode of cognition, as much as depression can be mobilized for specific political purposes. However, I use this two-fold political grammar of feelings to emphasize two different affective logics without viewing them as two sides of the same coin. Both logics show that to feel and feelings are not beyond, but rather part of, relations of power and domination. Affect and feelings are neither immutable substances nor exclusively positive or negative forces. Feeling is not asocial, neutral, or authentic, as some contemporary affect theories suggest but an aspect of politics. To feel and feelings are simultaneously an expression, an effect, and a goal of the political.



This two-fold logic makes it possible to emphasize pain, anger, depression, and exhaustion as (possibly) insightful political moments as well as their problematic entanglement in power relations. In this sense, political depression, exhaustion, and vulnerability can be integrated into political theory as aspects of the political without, however, making it an “ultimate ground” (Marchart 2007, 9) of the political. Such affective politics is not about propagating a passivizing victim politics by linking the right to citizenship, for instance, to the experience of violations. Political depression, for instance, does not indicate a lack or weakness, nor is it a call for patronizing interventions. It is also not the opposite of optimism or the counterpart of a (neo-)liberal politics of promise. Political depression can – although need not necessarily – be an effect and expression of the latter. By proposing this twofold political grammar of feelings, I want to emphasize that such affective politics go beyond a liberal understanding of politics and point toward a different form of thinking the political: While speaking of *feeling* politics can help us grasp the affective modes of connections and dependencies, a politics *of* feelings can make the unequal “distribution of emotions” (Bargetz 2015) visible and thus also bring to light possibilities of emancipation.

With this twofold political grammar of feelings – *feeling politics* and a politics *of* feelings – I do not seek to exclude or reject feelings from political theory, nor do I want to celebrate feelings as a promising new mode of the political. On the contrary, I aim to approach affective politics in a way that contributes more than a binary treatment of affect that either valorizes or devalorizes it. Merely criticizing affective politics falls just as short as the concern to exclude affects from the field of the political as supposedly personal, non-political, irrational, or therapeutic. The political grammar of feelings refers to a concept of the political in which affects both constitute a mode of criticizing and transgressing political as much as theoretical boundaries (Bargetz and Sauer 2015). In this manner, affective politics is less about determining what affect is and more about what affect does politically. It is in this sense that I aim to open a space for asking about how politics moves us, how feelings are mobilized politically, if and how they are equally or unequally distributed within the political, and thus how the political (also) works affectively.

## Notes

1. I would like to thank Erika Doucette for her careful English proof-reading.
2. Some of my considerations of a political grammar of feelings have been discussed and presented elsewhere (Bargetz 2014, 2019). Here, I rework and push these insights further.
3. My use of this notion is not related to the collection of texts by Max Scheler edited by Paul Good under the title *Grammatik der Gefühle* (Grammar of Feelings), by which Good highlights Scheler’s universal grammar of expression and a logic of feelings (Scheler 2000, 21–25).

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