



# Feelings without Structure: A Cultural Materialist View of Affective Politics

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The term ‘affective politics’ is sometimes used to dismiss political strategies as being directed merely at affects at the expense of rational analysis (Massumi 2015: 65f). While such uses are meant to criticize certain politics, appeals to the affects – and consequently, forms of propaganda or populism – do not have to be bad at all. The point here is that affects not only play a role for manipulative governments or populist movements, but are a crucial factor for the political in general, which in a post-modern world can no longer be naïvely understood as being grounded in nature or reason (Massumi 2015: VIII f). So, if politics are always entangled with affects, when do political affects become problematic? I will suggest that cultural materialism offers a few concepts that we can draw on to differentiate acceptable from harmful kinds of affective politics. More specifically, I am going to encourage a new reading of Raymond Williams’ concept of the structure of feeling and the way it is transformed in his later appropriation of Gramsci’s theory of hegemony.

Let me begin by briefly commenting on today’s media discourse on political affects. An obvious point of attention here would be the problematic use of the term post-truth, post-factual or *postfaktisch*, which was elected word of the year 2016 by *Oxford Dictionaries* and, subsequently, the *Gesellschaft für deutsche Sprache*. Mostly, the term is used in a vague sense to describe the sentiment that we have entered an age in which facts and reasoned argument no longer count in politics, and that there is a widespread tendency to give preference instead to the arousal of affects (GfdS 2016). This comes close to a negative definition of affective politics as outlined above. Maybe the term post-truth needs to be understood in a more qualified and deeper sense, for it can be said to reflect the unsettling absence of an absolute truth that could function as an authoritative ground for good policies or the correct creation of institutions for society. Post-truth in this sense would refer to a general condition, registering the very situation of (post-)modernity in which enlightenment approaches to truth, centred around reason and the self-determined subject, have become questionable (Marchart 2007). The danger here, and this is indeed the lesson to be learned from political phenomena like Brexit and Donald Trump, is that everything nowadays can pass as truth, the danger of total relativism and the rule of affects. The question that we should be asking here is the following: if an awareness of the



condition of radical contingency renders any grounding of truth uncertain, which ways do we have, at a theoretical level, to differentiate acceptable from detrimental affective politics?

One straightforward way to determine this distinction would be a theoretical approach by which one could differentiate good from bad affects in general. This was a central concern for enlightenment philosophy: to give a prominent example, Immanuel Kant focused on this issue as part of his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Extending his reflections on the sublime, Kant makes a key distinction between active and passive feelings, with the active (or “courageous”) affects capable of arousing the free will with its power to resistance qua reason, whose activation may well shed a critical light on social institutions. Thus, active emotions can be political, while passive (or “yielding”) affects are capable of affirming the individual and societal status quo (Kant 2003: 154f). Such attempts at classifying feelings in frameworks of moral philosophy are by no means a mere leftover from bygone ages; they have their proponents today, see, for instance, Martha Nussbaum (2013). The problem with conceptualizing and categorizing affects in this way, however, is that such an approach is utterly useless for the analysis of actual political phenomena. To begin with, these often cannot be simply analysed in terms of affectual activity or passivity, just think of the “contagiousness” that is discussed by recent theory (Ahmed 2010: 36). Also, to refer to an influential work by Sianne Ngai (2005), “ugly feelings” such as envy, irritation, anxiety, paranoia or disgust should not be dismissed as unpolitical from the beginning – rather, the psychological in-depth analyses that Ngai conducts in her work suggest that it may well be in such twisted and seemingly irrational affects that hidden claims to justice are registered and expressed. There is thus no such thing as a principally immoral kind of feeling. All we can state at this point is that a general ethical classification of affects will not help us to differentiate between acceptable and harmful forms of affective politics.

That does not mean that we should critically abstain from looking at affects altogether, or that we will have to face the complexity of any individual situation ever anew without being able to generalize at all. What I will suggest in the following is that Cultural Materialism has some ideas in store that can help us guide an analysis centred on affects, making it possible to bring out their political dimensions. There is a specific concept that is worth looking at here, namely Raymond Williams’ “structure of feeling”, which can be understood in part as a ‘pre-affective turn’ attempt to theorize the social dimensions and political resonances of affects. The use of the term is continuous yet never consistent throughout Williams’s work. Typically, the structure of feeling appears as “an analytically filled category that [stands] in for the specificity of the historical moment” (Grossberg 2010: 22), making the cultural text serve as a “barometer”, a “supersensitive indicator of movement at the ideological level” (Simpson 1995: 39). It is in this descriptive sense that the concept is widely used in cultural analysis. But Williams also uses the term



in a more qualified sense in which it contains a minimal normative core, a minimal 'should'. If culture is an ongoing creative process that is actively lived and experienced, the structure of feeling is both the motor and symptom of deep cultural change. The normative dimension relies precisely on the question which practices and cultural forms can be said to reflect 'real' change. The criterion seems to be that the structured feelings should be part of a development towards a more inclusive society, in which more people can participate as "whole human beings", the realization of full social equality, democratization and cosmopolitanism that exceeds and renegotiates the boundaries of any institutionalized social logic, the continued attempts in a "long revolution" to overcome the "radical disorder in which the humanity of some men [sic!] is denied and by that fact the idea of humanity itself is denied." (Williams 2006: 101) The normative core of the structure of feeling, then, is an idea of justice which aims at the improvement of material conditions as well as a culture of "active mutual responsibility and co-operation." (Williams 2006: 101) We should note that the form of the phrase itself can be said to reflect this normative dimension: articulated as a tension between "structure" and "feeling", the term serves as a warning not to dismiss that challenging and precarious connection. "Feeling" in affectual experience and everyday activity should not be politically facilitated so as to cut its ties with its socially "structured" dimensions, while "structures" – social conventions and institutions – must pass the ongoing test of lived and "felt" reality.

The use of the concept in this second, normative sense is implied when the later Williams incorporates it in his appropriation of Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Most famously, in *Marxism and Literature* Williams sets up an influential triad that is apt to politically classify socio-cultural practices or forms: the dominant, the residual and the emergent. The dominant is the central system of meanings and values whose renewal is dependent for renewal on processes of incorporation of elements of residual and emergent forms. The residual encompasses formerly dominant forms which have historically survived to play a reduced but active role in the present (Williams 122f). The emergent, in contrast, stands for new forms, whose most likely sources are new generations, a rising class, new social movements or whole formations (Williams 1977: 123-27). It is within his discussion of the emergent that Williams' oldest concept, the structure of feeling, reappears as the "pre-emergent", which is to say not yet fully articulated "social experiences in solution" in a phase preceding their becoming stabilized into fixed and openly visible cultural forms (Williams 1977: 126, 133). Both the residual and the emergent are prone to be incorporated by the dominant, but they can also stand as alternatives or even oppositional forms and thus challenge the dominant in struggles for hegemony. Obvious examples would be the (pseudo-)absorption of the residual principles of some (not all!) aspects of Christian ethics by the Western capitalist state (Williams 1977: 122), or the absorption of emergent oppositional movements, like the



German Green party in the 1980s, that end up as fully incorporated into the dominant order.<sup>1</sup>

We should take a closer look at the category of the emergent, including what Williams calls the pre-emergent, to finally tackle the problem of how to assess the line that separates acceptable from detrimental affective politics. In an election system modelled according to market logics, every political actor fighting for votes will most likely assert to have something 'new' to offer, but some forms of populism seem to have a more absolute tendency to fetishize 'newness' itself. It is in this sense that a political party posing as an all-encompassing 'alternative' such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), or, in larger terms, a movement referring to itself as the New Right, is eager to claim that there is something central that was hitherto excluded by the dominant logic and constellation of power. A straightforward way to deal with such populist assertions would be to critically question this claim for the 'new', i.e. demonstrate that such positions are really only updates for the dominant informed by the residual. Thus looking at the policies put forward in the AfD-Parteiprogramm, or at Donald Trump's suggestions of how to better represent the "silent majority", it is easy to see – though at the same time necessary to point out without relent –, the straightforward attempts to activate residual horizons, most prominently, the pre-democratic yearning for strong and pseudo-aristocratic leaders, in order to legitimize and realize neo-liberal agendas. Such endeavours by no means challenge the dominant status quo, but merely help to keep it in place – the most obvious examples would be entrepreneurs-turned-into-politicians such as Donald Trump or, at a smaller (German) scale, figures like Frauke Petry.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, rather than merely offering support for the dominant, the residual may also retain its alternative or oppositional quality and may even tap into Williams' third category, the emergent. One would expect that politics from the left attempt to claim and identify with the emergent, but what we should take into account here is that dominant politics, too, may well be interested in turning towards emergent practices, meanings and values, and they sometimes do so in ways that can be said to go beyond the mere interest to stabilize hegemony. An example for this would be Chancellor Angela Merkel's initial behaviour during the refugee crisis of 2015. The temporary opening of Germany's borders came as a surprise to many. Some commentators have attributed this step to Merkel's residual horizon of Christian altruism, which would explain a pastor's daughter's decisiveness and unexpected emotionality regarding the reception of refugees in times of war. However, we should take into account some of the key rhetorics used by

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<sup>1</sup> The example Williams gives is the emergence and quick incorporation of a radical popular press in 19<sup>th</sup>-century England (1977: 124).

<sup>2</sup> This observation corresponds with critical views that stress the important role of national-liberalism in the AfD; however, one also should not forget the party's (and PEGIDA's) openness towards more downright racist groups and individuals (Becher 2015: 55-88).



Merkel, especially her often-cited appropriation of Obama's former election slogan "Yes we can", which became "Wir schaffen das", "We can do this". We should also consider one of her strongest emotional appeals at the outset of the crisis, that "this" – Germany – would be "no longer her country" if it abstained from opening its doors to those in need of shelter and assistance. Such rhetoric evokes a national imaginary that one could broadly associate with the Schröder/Fischer government and that has been frequently activated since then, namely the myth of a good and reformed Germany that is open-minded, peaceful and takes global responsibility. Like the "Sommermärchen" of the soccer world championship of 2006, the pride of Germany should be based on a welcoming culture of receiving guests ("Die Welt zu Gast bei Freunden"). While alluding to this national imaginary here is certainly part of Merkel's strategy, and while one could also assert that her behaviour was, as so often, the most pragmatic in this situation (and not even economically implausible considering Germany's demand for new workforce in lower-wage jobs), one could also make the case that Merkel's stance was out to attract and gain backing from some emergent strands. Looking at the reactions from parts of the public, there actually was – besides much disdain and protest – also a huge wave of support, innumerable helpers who not only enthusiastically welcomed the migrants, but also provided sustained assistance and commitment to cope with the new situation, which many felt would not be of only short duration. What made Merkel's statement appealing, was, arguably, the possibility of understanding "We can do this" in the sense of 'We can achieve this' rather than 'We can manage this', as a call to act in concert to extend solidarity beyond national boundaries.

I would argue, then, that such resonances can be explained by relating them to Williams' category of the emergent, or more specifically, to the pre-emergent anticipating the possible direction of new social movements, formations and institutions. If you really want a more open and responsible society in a globalized age, in which the condition of people in and from other regions really matters and is not habitually blacked-out by selective perception (Butler 2009), Merkel's approach to tackling the crisis seemed to offer a realizable glimpse of a possible alternative, against all odds. It goes without saying that her interests were directed very much at incorporating the emergent for the narrower logic of crisis management. But then again, it would be too simple to assert that this was only all about the affirmation and consolidation of the hegemonic block, as some assumptions of the dominant logic (stability of border regimes, employment and other social policies) were effectively challenged.

This would be my example for something that could be defended as acceptable affective politics. However, I would further suggest that focusing on the category of the (pre-)emergent also helps to consolidate the critique of certain populist movements. What needs to be taken into account here is the importance such movements typically attribute to cultural forms that can be related to the emergent or pre-emergent. An



obvious example would be the “Montagsdemos” as appropriated by PEGIDA and related groups, once half-spontaneous rallies in the last days of an “actually existing socialist” state where unwanted demonstrations officially did not exist, signifying the very genesis of a new social formation, the very first glimpses of democratic visibility. By appropriating this cultural form, the right is out to suggest that something new and strong is about to crystallize whose contours are still blurry. However, from a critical point of view, the ‘new’ whose emergence is signalled here can and should be straightforwardly denied: there is much affectual hostility, but what the protesters really want apart from hatred remains unclear. The relation to the (pre-)emergent typically fostered by right-wing movements is marked by superficiality, with vague social references and a mostly imprecise political agenda. One could use Walter Benjamin’s (1968) phrase of an “aestheticization of politics” to describe these strategies which peruse the aesthetic to provide an intense direct experience that is advertised as the political itself, but is really a mere replacement for the political. The point here is that such group-feeling is centred around a nationally homogenous identity and is thus clearly to be distinguished from a political sense of commonality which relies solely on the unrestricted participation of free and diverse individuals. This confusion is epitomized by the so-called PEGIDA-hymn that was brought into circulation at the end of 2015, trying its best to evoke a rapt and archaic group-feeling, with the absence of lyrics adequately representing the lack of structured content (Peggy Sounds 2015).

Let me make it clear what I am and am not saying here. We should register that the feelings expressed by PEGIDA followers are certainly ‘structured’ in that they reflect the real experience of being socially neglected. Also, the attempts to channel these feelings to facilitate emotions of hatred are ‘structured’ in the sense of racist and nationalist ideology. But in the light of the normative reading of Williams’ concept proposed in this article, it is my primary aim to point out a key element of disturbance that marks this structure of feeling; an element that makes it difficult to see the protesters’ feelings primarily as an expression of social injustice, but rather signals the very attempt to manipulate – and thus to disturb – an authentic relation between socially conditioned feeling on the one hand, and discourses and institutions on the other, which would be apt to clarify this dimension of injustice as such. It is in this sense that such feelings expose a lack of structure, in which the pre-emergent – qualified as containing a germ of justice – is prevented from manifesting itself.

To conclude, Williams’ hopes when theorizing the structure of feeling and the pre-emergent over the decades were that these concepts could be appropriate to capture an ideal of communication in a full sense, not in the sense of communicative action à la Habermas, but rather in the sense of an ongoing communicative interaction, the material process of collective meaning-production (Jones 2004: 60). The pre-emergent expresses a moment when communicative barriers begin to crumble and new (and better)



connections are beginning to be realized. The structure of feeling seen in this way is a minimal (but real) utopia. As cultural critics, we can make a case for certain forms of affective politics or populism to be acceptable if we can plausibly relate them to this opening-up of communication. On the other hand, we also have to be critically aware when feelings without structure enter the political arena, and we should not hesitate to follow Williams in exhibiting these phenomena as faking of communication when they are really aimed at undermining the political by essentializing connections. The PEGIDA protesters' hatred against the so-called "Lügenpresse" (paralleled by Trump's recent denunciation of news organisations as "fake news") is thus not simply one among many irritating aspects of their political culture, but can rather be said to reveal the deeply disturbing principle of anti-communication at the heart of their politics.

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