

LAURA KEMMER
HafenCity University Hamburg

CHRISTIAN HELGE PETERS
University of Hamburg

VANESSA WEBER
Helmut-Schmidt-University Hamburg

On Right-Wing Movements, Spheres, and Resonances:

Interview with Ben Anderson and Rainer Mühlhoff

This interview began in Berlin and continued virtually, as an active email exchange, between November 2017 and April 2018. The conversation was sparked by the recent and ongoing turn to the right in global politics. It departs from exploring ‘affective modes of inquiry’, which our interview partners have applied in their articles ‘The Affective Styles of Donald Trump’ (Anderson 2017) and ‘Fatal Identification’ (Mühlhoff 2017a). We then move on to discuss the events of Brexit in the UK and the return of the far right to German Parliament in 2017, as much as recent terms such as ‘techlash’ or ‘fake news’. Against this background, we tackle the core concern of this special issue by asking for the locations of affect in the concepts of ‘affective resonance’ (Mühlhoff 2015, 2019b) and ‘(atmo)spheres’ (Anderson 2009). Finally, we ponder the potential of ‘affective counterpolitics’ and the challenges this brings for an academic engagement with realpolitik.

KEYWORDS: Right-Wing Populism; Spheres; Resonances; Locating Affect; Trump; Counterpolitics

VW: If we look at analyses of the rise of right-wing populism in Europe and the USA, there seems to be a tendency to explain these developments by referring to notions of ‘affect’. Do you think affect has, historically speaking, reached a new quality?

BA: I start from a slightly different place. The emergence of right-wing populisms has been accompanied by a proliferation of attempts to diagnose the public moods that supposedly characterize the contemporary condition. Typically, this involves identifying named moods that supposedly unite a group or groups (anger, resentment, a feeling of being left behind, and so on) and are expressed in the events that are then taken to compose the phenomena of right-wing populism. It’s a way of telling a compelling story about the contemporary condition. I’m skeptical of it, partly because any explanatory mode of inquiry risks not staying with the event; it risks reinscribing lines between cause and effect (with the affective or emotive no longer being that which should be explained, but now standing as that which does the explaining). And it risks creating a frame that reduces the event—and the potentialities and possibilities that not only accompany events but are what an event is—to the already named and known. It enables a consoling story that teaches us that we already always know what is happening.

I'm reading *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* by Pankaj Mishra (2017) at the moment, and the book is symptomatic of this kind of approach and its problems. As with other examples of this genre of explanation, 'anger' as the named mood does a lot of work; it unites disparate groups at the level of a feeling that motivates, it mediates between the group and the political event or act that is the expression of the mood, and it becomes the source of critique. Now this approach does generate insights about the force of collective affects and, implicitly, the strange forms they take, but it is also part of a desire for explanation, to make sense of a moment felt as turbulent. So, to return to your question, I don't think we should grant emotion or affect explanatory power, or, rather, there are modes of inquiry in addition to the explanatory for relating to and encountering how affective life happens. My starting point is to experiment with descriptive and speculative modes of inquiry that discern the geo-historically specific apparatuses, encounters, and conditions through which affective life becomes organized. This doesn't involve a claim about the special status of affect or emotion today.

RM: I think that 'affect' is an important concept to understand current forms of political mobilization and shifts in political subjectivity. I agree with Ben that such an explanation must not be reductive; and I see it precisely as the pursuit of current affect theories to articulate nonreductive explanations of the role of affectivity in social and political processes.

To stay on the level of phenomena for one second—the current rise of right-wing populism, or political 'mobilization' in general—it is clear to me that such a thing as affect has always been involved in social and political processes. The general relevance of affect per se is *not* something new. Yet what does change in the course of history is the modes of affectivity, that is, the concrete interactive forms, mediated spaces, temporal patterns of affective dynamics, as well as the way affectivity is intertwined with discourse, with power structures and with hierarchies. Important questions, to me, are: In what *specific* way are events of political mobilization, outburst, or articulation carried by an interplay of 'affective dispositions' (Mühlhoff 2019a) in people with societal distributions of wealth, power, and discourses? What are the microsocioal underpinnings of these dynamics in the realm of something that may be called 'affective subjectivation'? That is to say, where does the *capacity* to affect and be affected, for instance by populist political speech or by a neo-authoritarian tone, come from?

Answering these questions in a mode of critical inquiry leads to affectivity not as a phenomenal but as a theoretical category—and here there might indeed be something new brought by the 'affective turn' (Clough 2007; Gregg and Seigworth 2010). In social theory and philosophy, affect has not always been central, or to be more precise, there is a history of dichotomous and pejorative understandings of affectivity as that which undermines rationality, reason, maturity, enlightenment, etc. The role of affect in politics is then connected to regression to an uncivilized, animal, barbaric state of society. Now, the difficulty is: Although right-wing populism *is* barbaric, it is important to point out that this is not because it is driven by affects. *Every* political movement and every critical project is driven by affects, so the point is not *whether* or not affect is relevant, but *how* it is involved. Contemporary affect studies are seeking for a nondichotomous understanding of affect that opens up to an understanding of the complex interplay of *modes* of affecting and being affected with discourses and power structures. An affect-theoretical analysis of right-wing populism could then ask for the forms of affecting and being affected (and their

microsocial presuppositions) that are typical for subjectivities that engage in this movement.

LK: Speaking of affective ‘modes of inquiry’, to borrow from Ben, both of you have written on Donald Trump and affect. Which were your intentions, if not ‘explaining’ populism with affect?

BA: When I wrote ‘The Affective Styles of Donald Trump’ I was interested in how his tone of anger coexisted with others in ways that suggest there is much more going on in the contemporary conjuncture than a resurgence of racialized resentment, as important and absolutely critical that is to understanding the present. What does it tell us about the present that Trump appeared to be giving people permission to once again enjoy their resentments? Or that he was offering the promise of dignity and recognition, albeit only ever for some racialized groups? And that he was enacted as a figure of action without constraint, for example in relation to the fantasy of a wall? So my attempt to understand Trump’s different affective styles was really an attempt to interrupt any analysis of contemporary populism that reduces it to, or identifies it with, a single, dominant mood.

RM: I agree on opposing accounts that reduce populism to a single dominant mood, and I find Ben’s analysis of the ‘affective styles’ of Trump very helpful. To stress this again, one can use affect as an explanatory category (and I see Ben doing this as well), but when I say ‘affect’ I mean *affectivity*, and that should be distinguished from *affects* (in the countable plural). By affectivity I mean, following Spinoza and Deleuze, a fundamental register of being that manifest itself in interpersonal dynamics of affecting and being affected, and that relies on certain *capacities* of each individual to affect and be affected by others. For instance, a psychology of resentments is a certain disposition of such affective capacities. This disposition can be triggered in a specific way by a hybrid mix of discursive and affective stimuli. In my article on Trump and his sexism [part II of ‘fatal identifications’ 2017a] I pointed out how the public denunciations of Trump’s sexism and of his political incompetency might actually have *helped* his campaign because it resonated with the affective dispositions of some voters. What made him ‘attractive’ is not his concrete positions in political questions but rather his *attitude towards* the machine of professional politics, media, and ‘elites’. The way he was denounced as stupid and chauvinistic, and constructed as ‘not to be taken seriously when it comes to matter-of-fact political debates,’ could easily be framed as a form of humiliation by ‘elitist’ media and politicians, and this humiliation could resonate affectively with the real humiliation many people who are left behind (economically and socially) might feel. I argued that by a mechanism of ‘fatal identification’ with Trump, accusations of sexism, stupidity, insufficient language level, etc., did not actually hit Trump but affected those of his followers who have heard such accusations against themselves before. Trump, in turn, could use this ‘fatal identification’ of his followers to appear even ‘stronger’ by way of refusing to even *try* to play on the same level of political and media debate as his critics and competitors (of both parties).

BA: One of the puzzles in the background to piece was to try and understand why critiques of Trump from the left—of his sexism, of his xenophobia, of his racism—were absolutely necessary, but at the same time insufficient. They missed something about Trump’s performance,

something about his mediatized enactment as a particular kind of figure, and something of people's attachments and investments in him. If Trump is symptomatic of a certain type of populism, then, ultimately, they miss how contemporary populisms resonate with some people's affective lives. With a few exceptions, there's still a residual tendency in critical work to presume that power works through the manipulation or modulation of fear, anxiety, and other so-called 'negative' emotions.

The implications of the folding of oppositional energies into the constitution of the event of Trump means that his authority and legitimacy was from the beginning, and will remain, fragile—the circulation of outrage and anger against him were part of the conditions of formation for Trump as political event. And we have seen that playing out since his inauguration, in the unprecedented scenes of protest that, uniquely for an American president, suspended many of the conventions around the suspension of critique of a new president. This means that it's not only possible but a responsibility to tell different stories about what the contemporary is that emphasizes those other tendencies that can't be reduced to the story that we now live in a populist moment. The problem in equating the event of Trump's emergence with a 'populist moment' is that the event was constituted, in part, through the circulation of outrage in relation to and response to Trump, as well as a set of closely related affective relations of bemused or indignant fascination. So the event of Trump is constituted, in part, by the circulations of repulsion and anger at revelations of his sexual harassment. They were absolutely necessary, but they also generated interest and attention in Trump; the constant proliferation of minor events associated with him, their piling up as they came and went, meant that he was constantly part of the landscapes of events.

CHP: Would you go about your investigations differently nowadays, for example in light of the events of Brexit in the UK and the return of the far right to the German Parliament?

RM: I would (and am starting to) investigate the whole development from a slightly broader perspective of emerging new forms of authoritarianism. What kind of modalities does an authoritarian psychology (or affectivity, or subjectivity) take in our times? Populism, seen through this lens, is but one modality. It would be a mistake to limit the debate of the shifts in contemporary politics to the underdogs in the Rust Belt, the 'undereducated', 'working-class', 'resigned white men' projecting their frustrations on immigrants. All this is true and these resentments are a problem. But an important part of the big picture is also that there is, in my observation, a new style of authoritarian psychology in milieus which are anything but undereducated or socioeconomically sidelined. I have, for instance, been writing about a type of neo-authoritarianism in Silicon Valley companies that is circling around the ideal of 'emergent leadership' and affectively stylized work environments (Mühlhoff 2018).

A slightly different but related form of this is evident in the diverse spheres of the alt-right movement. One of their strategies is to oppose the achievements of cultural critique by openly misogynist, xenophobic, and racist media interventions such as trolling, fake news, and providing spaces for extremist online subcultures (Nagle 2017). Others start from the insights of cultural critique to justify processes of reckless social selection facilitated by a transhumanist

vision of a ‘singularity’. In the wake of a new age of artificial intelligence technologies based on big data, there is a growing acceptance of the idea that discrimination of social groups is not an evil but a necessary side effect of an ongoing ‘fundamental revolution of mankind as a whole’. This attitude is very authoritarian but hard to break down to superficial affective dynamics of resentment. So the kind of research I would do today is a more broadly based investigation into new modes of racist, classicist, misogynist, and otherwise violent political movements also in privileged milieus beyond the ‘popular classes’.

BA: There is a difficult question here about which tendencies and trajectories we pay attention to as we tell stories about what the present is and what might become. I’m less convinced than Rainer about the import of that transhumanist vision of a ‘singularity’ to the alt-right, or, rather, I’m as interested in how critical attention to what is still a marginal idea is, in part, symptomatic of the emergence of what some call a ‘techlash’—anxiety about the threat of ‘big tech’.

To return back to the discussion about modes of inquiry, I’m interested in practicing a type of hopeful criticism that attempts to stay with the multiplicity of tendencies that compose a conjuncture. Thinking about the situation today, I’d start—or am starting in current work—by understanding what I do think Trump and Brexit have in common: a palpable feeling of an absence of control, or what Lauren Berlant (2011) has rightly, I think, described as a crisis of practical sovereignty. I was struck that one of the commonalities across the Trump and Brexit campaigns was the critique of bureaucracy or, rather, how a critique of bureaucracies stood in for palpable feelings of thwartedness and stuckness. Now, that sense is folded into the intensification of forms of white resentment that we see today. It is absolutely a matter of new types of racism. It is also a sense that is being responded to by left and progressive organizations. For example, Labour’s general election campaign under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK offered participation in the democratic process as a different kind of solution to that palpable sense of an absence of control.

My sense is that contemporary politics will turn on different responses to what I think has crossed a threshold to become a widespread structure of feeling. Entwined with that, I would also try and understand the political life of disappointed hopes or failed promises, and the emerging force of blame and attachment of responsibility for nonrealization. And how blame coexists with intensified hostility to groups or individuals felt to be interrupting or halting some kind of promised change. In Britain, a whole series of figures have emerged around which anger has gathered and become attached as a way of making sense of the nonrealization of the promises of Exit; ‘remoaners’, the EU, judges, metropolitan elites, and so on.

Consider, for example, how in the UK the figure of the ‘remoaner’ functions as a way of attaching blame and delegitimizing dissent or disagreement. And it is done in strikingly affective terms—remoaners have the wrong tone and the wrong relation to futurity. If responses to a feeling of the absence of control and the political lives of disappointed hopes as well as how hopes are maintained are necessary to understanding the present situation, it’s also important to understand how that which is supposedly in crisis transforms and continues in the midst of the unsettling that is a crisis. I’d like, for example, to think about the reemergence of a form of anxious liberalism—whereby the critique of liberal institutions and forms and figures is met by

anxiety about their dissolution and an increased bellicose support for liberalism felt in an intensified mockery of nonliberal figures. What's striking about the figures of populism in the US and UK—Trump and Nigel Farage—is that they are figures of mockery, disdain, and derision.

CHP: Rainer, do you agree with Ben's approach to 'hopeful criticism'?

RM: In theory I like the idea of a 'hopeful criticism', but practically, I'm afraid I don't share its optimism. At least not while the constellation at hand is still so little understood, in particular on its (infra)structural and its social-psychological levels. In order to expand on a previous point, I think one cannot overemphasize the import of the role of media and media technologies in all these phenomena that were mentioned—and there is even a lot of conceptual work to be done in order to reach an informed critique. The circulation of affects and information, the formation of political movements and countermovements are all inherently mediatized. Last year, broadcasting media and social media were about equal in market shares of news consumption, but the impact of the latter on society is still largely unknown. Here it is important that media are not only amplifiers or 'transmitters' of discourses and affects, they are not only increasing the range of interpersonal processes that would otherwise be more local. We need a much better understanding of how media is constitutive and generative of *modes* of affectivity and political speech, of subjectivity and intersubjectivity.

An investigation into this also implies a critique (in the sense of 'deep understanding') of the economic and ideological structures that are behind the rise of new media technologies. The diagnosis of a new 'anxiety of 'big tech' too easily distracts from a detailed analysis of how new media technology interferes with social and societal distributions of wealth, capital, and power. Examples such as the discussion of targeted advertising in political campaigns, recently exemplified by the case of 'Cambridge Analytica' and its potential involvement in Trump's election campaign, show the direct connection between the practical relevance of new media technologies for everybody and the (perhaps still uncovered or marginal) ideological structures of those running these services. After all, the New Economy has brought about a *new class* of capital owners and economic authorities (tech entrepreneurs typically aged twenty-five to thirty-five) that are now, in times of an incipient alt-right movement, increasingly mingling with the *old (postaristocratic) class* of capital owners.

As an addition, the criticism of bureaucracy, alongside that of representative democracy as an 'outdated technology', is shared by tech-optimistic but neoconservative ideologies. Direct democracy today is in most cases accompanied by the vision of technologically enabled structures of political participation, while it is less acknowledged that these structures will always be interwoven with (if not explicitly owned by) economic actors. Instead of a dispute over anxiety vs. antianxiety of technological advances I would therefore say that we need new approaches and new concepts in critical social theory that shed more light on the details of the triangle of politics, media, and affectivity.

VW: Discussions about populism are often combined with the diagnosis of a post-truth era and the power of 'fake news'. Where does this leave affect?

BA: What strikes me about the contemporary is an intensified desire for truth, which of course may be symptomatic of the set of changes that are gathered within the diagnosis of the ‘post-truth’, understood as a partly nostalgic longing for some kind of disinterested account of how the world is that would offer a way of navigating within the turbulence of the present. I think we see that desire for truth in the emergence of new mechanisms of audit that, as with any mechanism of audit, become devices for the production of a fragile reassurance. One example is the proliferation of ‘fact checking’. Perhaps another symptom is that the figure of the truth teller multiplies and is claimed and inhabited by multiple actors. Trump presented himself as a truth teller. So did proponents of Brexit in the UK. One of the connections between Trump and Brexit is that they both promised recognition of a truth that people supposedly felt, but had been denied. Perhaps this intensification of a desire for ‘truth’ is symptomatic not of a ‘post-truth’ era but rather of the crisis of liberalism we’re living through (whilst remembering that liberalism is often felt to be in crisis and frequently uses the affectively imbued rhetoric of crisis).

So, in answer to your question, for me affect is located in the continued attachment to the promise of truth and in the anxieties that gather around the absence of truth or, rather, an inchoate sense of its absence. It’s also located in the sense of confusion, or perhaps perpetual doubt, that follows from the increased recognition that a phenomena called ‘fake news’ exists. And it’s located in the desire for alternative forms of information and knowledge about the world and the sense of truths denied or repressed that spawns the phenomenon of fake news. It’s also located, in the context of new media infrastructures, in the momentary intensities of retweeting or sharing something that might, retrospectively, be revealed as ‘fake news’ but in the act is felt as a truth that matters and others should be exposed to.

RM: Less than Ben, I think the contemporary is characterized by a desire for truth, but for authenticity. It really matters whether a political actor seems to be existentially connected with the politics s/he is making, with the ‘truth’ s/he is claiming, and whether s/he is putting him/herself at risk. This points at a dimension of political speech, embodiment, and discourse that is different from the question of truth. It cannot be mapped in a coordinate system from true to false; rather, it stands orthogonal to the truth-axis. Contemporary subjects have a sensitivity for someone’s attitude vis-à-vis the game of truth of politics (and others). There is an affectivity that concerns (or actually enacts) certain relations *to* the question of truth whatsoever. Whether a political actor comes across as attractive depends on whether s/he can authentically play with the game of truth, altering the rules, refusing submission to its procedures and patterns of hypocrisy, putting him/herself at risk for what s/he claims is the ‘truth’.

This dimension of a relation to the game of truth is best described in terms of an attitude (or ethos). This ethos is perceived in terms of (embodied) authenticity. Affectivity is therefore located in this dimension, that is, people like *how* Trump acts and speaks (vis-à-vis the ‘elitist’ discourse of the establishment), not exactly what he says. There are many different ‘affective styles’ of authenticity—for the one, the dry ‘objectivity’ of a fact-checker or a newspaper dossier thoroughly ‘scrutinizing’ someone else’s claims is authentic; for the other, it is the macho demeanor that break taboos, ‘plays’ the system, and claims to tell the ‘truth’ on inconvenient

topics (such as migration and feminism).

Finally, the prevalence of a strong sensitivity for (perceived) authenticity is also connected to the emergence of segregated discursive spheres and affect-worlds. If we were oriented around truth, this would be a flat structure that penetrates all milieus and subjectivities, integrating them in agonism. But authenticity, unlike ‘truth’, builds a spherical topology that is antagonistic. You would rather believe your friends than a stranger; you would rather believe someone who has suffered from similar things (see the media humiliations of Trump) or whom you take as an idol than someone who shows the insignia of scholarly competency and ‘wisdom’.

VW: Ben, what do you think about the notion of ‘authenticity’ and, related, how important are new media infrastructures?

BA: I really like Rainer’s attention to how authenticity is now a matter of the relation to the game of truth of politics. It helps us understand the rejection of ‘centrist’ politicians and political styles, which are felt to enact a disinterested, hypocritical, or cynical relation to the game of truth of politics. We need to understand more about how different styles of this embodied authenticity are performed and encountered in ways that cross left and right distinctions. That means paying more attention to the form of collective affects enabled by new media infrastructures. Every media infrastructure is simultaneously part of an affective infrastructure. I use ‘infrastructure’ as an open term for the channels and forms that mediation takes as affective life forms and deforms—that is, the material conditions for the circulation and distribution of intensities that then fold back into the infrastructure such that the material and affective become indivisible.

Clearly, new media infrastructures such as Twitter and Facebook were central to the composition of the event of Trump’s emergence. For one, it is a constantly changing landscape of events and quasi-events; more or less intense disruptions to everyday life that provide a background sense of liveliness, that something is happening. They give a sense of dynamism. And I think that sense of something happening, of novelty, gathered around the figure of Trump and was something attached to by supporters and opponents.

The global circulation of outrage in relation to Trump depends, for example, on the sense of the novelty and dynamism of unfolding phenomena. At the same time, new media infrastructures enable the composition of different but adjacent affect worlds that cluster around the same figure, but rarely if ever touch as separate spheres take form. One of the most important commonalities in the responses to the election of Trump and to the vote to leave the EU was a sense that people’s ‘bubbles’ had burst.

RM: I agree that different adjacent affect-worlds can emerge around one and the same topic or figure that don’t connect. This is, in part, a consequence of media such as Facebook or Twitter, which are inherently segregated as they are feedback based, giving higher priority to those items you will probably ‘like’. In the US, also the broadcasting media is vastly split into two worlds of truths and affects. I also think that after Brexit and Trump, for some these bubbles had burst. However, I’m not so sure that many were really *surprised* to find out that there were other bubbles apart from their own. To the contrary, in order to take the problem ahead by its full

complexity, we should assume that most people *know very well* that there is another half of society and other bubbles of truths and affects about a certain topic. The phenomenon of affect and information spheres is not to be explained by plain ignorance. Rather, from an affectological point of view, what needs to be explained is that people *want to cling* to their own sphere. Opposing the others is more important than (and logically preceding) stating the truth. The bubble starts not from ignorance but from a *desire for group cohesion* around what is a shared perception of authenticity. This can be poignantly seen in the example of the dispute around whether the sun was shining at Trump's inauguration, and how many people came to his compared to Obama's.

LK: Turning to the central question of this special issue, namely the locations of affect, in your respective work we have encountered two concepts which we found particularly helpful: Rainer's 'affective resonance' (Mühlhoff 2015, 2019b) and Ben's 'atmospheres' (Anderson 2009).

BA: This turns us to the question of form in relation to how we understand collective affects, an issue that I think needs much more attention and moves us away from assertions that affect is formless (or synonyms for the formless such as the ephemeral). Work on affect has coincided with a proliferation of the forms that geographers and others think and research with to make sense of constitution and composition; wholes, fragments, networks, structures, gases, circulations, and so on. But I think much more needs to be done on thinking about the implication of particular forms for how we understand the organization of affective lives {**Au: or "lives"?**}

It seems to me as though two forms have implicitly dominated how atmospheres have emerged as a conceptual-empirical concern in the social sciences and humanities; the form of the whole and the form of a gas. This gives the problematic sense that an atmosphere is everywhere and without location. Instead, I start with the spatial form embedded in the term itself: sphere. More than a geometric figure, I understand atmospheres as spheres in the sense that they happen as some kind of temporary organization of a series of formless, even chaotic, (in/non)human forces. So atmospheres are the temporary creation of an interior and an outside. The consequence is that we must always think about atmospheres in the plural and assume, before analysis, a fractured, uneven, geography of atmospheres that don't align or add up. This is what I was getting at in relation to the discussion of the affective worlds that form in relation to new media infrastructures in your previous question.

RM: What I am calling 'affective resonance' is a mutually constituted dynamic of affecting and being affected between a (small) number of individuals (typically in a dyad or small group). The crucial point about resonance is that although the dynamic is reciprocally constituted (that is, equally deriving from the affective dispositions of each of the individuals in a nonadditive but entangled fashion), it is not necessarily *symmetric in form*. There is a myriad of mutually stabilizing but *asymmetric, complementary, or antagonistic* affective roles. Me being grumpy and passive aggressive may be the result of my partner playing extra cool and extra happy in a certain situation—and half a day later, roles may switch. Me doing a certain gendered

performance of interaffectivity in a certain hookup may be induced by the other person playing a complementary but not symmetric role to mine—and in another hookup I find myself in a different role.

The key about resonance is that the dynamics of affecting and being affected one engages in are always *both* deriving from your own affective disposition *and* irreducibly coshaped by the other's affective disposition (Mühlhoff 2018, 2019a,b). Affective resonance is a process where patterns of affecting and being affected *dynamically stabilize* in a concrete relation of individuals; resonance is causally symmetric (that is, reciprocal) but not synchronizing in form. To me, affective resonance is therefore a concept designed for analyses of *micropower* bringing about a subject's embodiment in the affective niches of microsocial formations. It can be used to discuss how social structures and microsocial power differences may dynamically stabilize in interaffectivity.

I think that the concept of an atmosphere, as Ben understands it, captures a potentially similar phenomenon, but from a different perspective. Through the lens of atmospheres, affective relations between individuals are seen in terms of a geography of spheres; if individuals are involved in an atmosphere, this results in a certain kind of (momentary) inside/outside delineation towards other parts of the world. For the concept of resonance, inside vs. outside, or the topology of spheres of affect, is not the starting point, rather, resonance names an inherent quality of intensity that is located on the level of causal relations (and remains open on the question of which concrete forms emerge). Therefore I think that the concept of resonance could go together with Ben's atmospheres very well and shed some light on what is going on *within* an (atmo)sphere. It can explain how asymmetric ways of affecting and being affected might emerge as a reciprocal process between different individuals within the same atmosphere.

BA: I'm intrigued by Rainer's distinction between the symmetric and the asymmetric, as it stays with the problem of form, as well as the question of how specific concepts help us attune to the organization of affect. It raises the question of whether atmosphere as a concept can be thought of outside the form of a whole, and of the relation between atmosphere and that which is conditioned by and in turn enacts and carries atmosphere. My starting point is not to presume that the relation is necessarily between an atmosphere and an individual, as two already-existing things. As atmospheres form and deform, they condition and fold into the formation of any number of collectives—whether between two, or in relation to the groups we give the names crowds or publics too, or even the weak forms of collective sociality as we inhabit a shared space with others.

In other words, for me, atmosphere allows us to ask what is and isn't shared and allows us to wonder away at the strange types of affective mediation that condition without determining affective life. What I like about Rainer's concept of affective resonance is that it addresses the question of causality, an issue too often forgotten about in the wake of critiques of forms of linear causation. I like how it opens up space to begin from the relation between two and allows attunement to the multiplicity of forces that make up what is an irreducibly complicated relation composed of a range of trajectories, tendencies, and latencies.

RM: Yes, I agree, and I see a lot of fruitful exchange between the two concepts. Affective resonance, as it is a causal concept, enables a strong microsocial perspective, asking what are peoples' affective dispositions (or capacities to resonate), how do they result from their biographic past, and how do they enter into affective dynamics in the presence based on a nonlinear interplay of affecting and being affected. Ben's concept of atmosphere enables to point out how, perhaps based on resonance/dissonance dynamics and enabled by media spaces, (temporary) segregation into spheres of discourses and affect worlds takes place. An atmosphere is then a kind of (temporary) structure that is to a certain degree independent of the concrete individuals within, in the sense that some might go, others might come, and the atmosphere still persists. An atmosphere thus seems to come with some kind of spatiotemporal cohesion, maybe it is stabilized as affects circulate around discursive entities and objectives that are crystallizing points in the organization of affectivity within such a sphere, maybe they are stabilized by forces of repulsion or segregation between the spheres.

LK: Ben, earlier you have located affect in pervasive attachments to (truth-)promises. We wonder, what are the promised 'objects' (Ahmed 2003) of the political right, and what can we learn from these promised objects about the spatiotemporal dimension of affect worlds?

BA: Let's take the example of Trump's promise to build a wall. The promised object is not yet there, or at least is only just becoming materially there in the form of prototypes, but the promise is present, and the promise has an affective charge and force. I'm interested in the charge and force of promises as they are encountered and related to. In the case of the wall promised by the Trump administration, it was entangled with racialized and xenophobic bellicosity, carnivalesque boasting, and a critique of contemporary America amid a felt story of decline. And it's through the hopes invested in its construction that the promise comes to act on and through the feel of the here and now. We might also think of how failed promises, and associated lost or disappointed hopes, linger and live on. Your question is, then, an important one because it reminds us that affect is a matter of the (re/de)composition of the present—but a present stretched into strange types of time; past presents, present pasts, future presents, past futures, and so on.

RM: There is a parallel to Trump's 'wall' project in German politics that always struck me: Horst Seehofer, a conservative German politician (CSU) of the same generation as Trump, former minister-president of Bavaria, now the new Minister of Interior of Germany, has for years been catching a lot of media attention around his populist idea of an 'Obergrenze' (upper limit) to the number of refugees admitted per year to Germany. It is interesting how the spatial term of a 'Grenze' (border) is barely concealed in the term 'Obergrenze', which is formally (but not psychologically) only about a 'number'. In analysis of the circulation of affects around this topic, one has to ask, why are people so easily affected by what seems to come across as a penetration of their (nation-state's) borders? Here my choice of research perspective would be a kind of social psychology based on affect theory, investigating into peoples' affective dispositions. There is a thought by Klaus Theweleit (1980) that speaks a lot to me although it needs rephrasing in less psychoanalytic but more affect-theoretical terms: He observes, in his writings on World War II, that followers of fascism seem to conflate, psychologically, the border of the nation-state with the surface (or border) of their own bodies, and this again is connected to certain

psychological limits. There seems to be widely proliferated psychological disposition where violation to nation-state borders are felt as violations to one's own physical integrity.

CHP: Let us turn now to the question of what an 'affective counterpolitics' (Massumi 2015) might entail. We would like to first ask Rainer, who has problematized elsewhere a language of 'political correctness' as exclusive (Mühlhoff 2017b). Do you think reflecting on affective politics is more important than a critique of language in antiracist and antisexist struggles?

RM: I do not think it makes sense to weigh between these alternatives, since affective politics and antiracism/antisexistism are not opposites, but very important for each other. Answering this is of course a controversial thing to do for me as a white man. All I say may be quite rightly dismissed by those who know better. What I was suggesting in the text you mention is that from an affect perspective, antiracist and antisexist work cannot be reduced to language politics (such as gender-neutral language) and codes of conduct one has to submit to when entering a certain political group/space. I see the political genesis and adequacy of such instruments in some contexts. But first, the problem is that adhering to linguistic and behavioral forms does not address or change the sexism and racism in people's affective dispositions, based on which they are able to commit violent speech or behavior in the first place. And second, the implementation of rule books and language policies runs the risk of turning into an authoritarian policing that creates inclusions and exclusions to a political space based on a *moral* codex. Sometimes the persons who commit such policing seem to be doing this over the heads of potential victims and with a 'lust' of self-righteousness that seems not fully reflected. Importantly, this is not a general feature of leftist, antiracist, or feminist spaces, but individuals with a 'watchdog mentality' can go unnoticed in these environments as they share the consensus to combat discrimination.

I think this behavior is counterproductive because antidiscrimination politics should aim at mutual awareness-raising that also addresses the underlying affective and psychological structures of discriminatory behavior in each of us. The implementation of language policies, on the other hand, sometimes tends to create a code of belonging vs. not-belonging that operates by making people feel ashamed instead of trying to convince them. At least if integrating people from other 'bubbles' (such as the so-called 'popular class') into a broader political movement is the goal, one should notice that language codes can silence people or give them the feeling that everything they say is already clumsy and inappropriate. That's why I think *in a political space*, sexist or racist statements should be countered on a *political* and not a *moral register*. Otherwise, political spaces become ethically charged, displacing agonistic dispute to personal antagonisms. Of course this is often hard, affectively, as it may entail standing a conversation where other(s) use violent vocabulary or invectives, and it requires tough skills to oppose such utterances and performances (which are often loud and space-consuming) quickly and firmly on a level of *political* argument. And, after all, it is not the job of victims and traumatized people to explain again and again why certain behavior is violent. Yet, in the moment when we seek to establish a broad societal left movement, we need left political spaces that are not 'safe spaces' but where a clash of habitus and affective personality traits can happen on agonistic grounds. (And still, we also need safe spaces; I'm not denying this.) I agree that the private is political, but that doesn't conversely imply that *all* the political should also be private: Not *all* political spaces should

collapse into social and intimate spaces, or ‘ethical bubbles’, in short.

LK: Ben, would you agree that the ‘micropolitical’ dimension is crucial for an affective counterpolitics?

BA: The micropolitical is not synonymous with the small scale or the private. A micropolitical dimension is a constitutive dimension of all political activity and any political movement, and allows us to attune to and notice the tones that animate political action and how that action bears an affective quality, or qualities. That’s partly a theoretical lesson from Deleuze and Guattari’s analysis of fascism, which I always discuss when I teach Deleuze and Guattari given how important the reaction to fascism is in their thought, but it’s also something that is learned from long traditions of reflection by activists on the material and affective infrastructures that political movements attempt to build to sustain action. As for the answers today, I’d begin with trying to understand the dynamics of what’s happening in response to Trump’s racism and xenophobia and attempt to relate to them through the practice of something like a hopeful criticism that discloses potentialities as immanent to the unfolding dynamics of a conjuncture. I think my hope in relation to Trump as he emerged as a candidate was that a bored counterpublic would take form and, in doing so, drain the eventfulness from his emergence. This would be a counterpublic that responded with indifference, with a shrug, rather than in a manner that amplified attention and fascination. It would be a counterpublic that didn’t laugh at jokes about Trump on late-night comedy shows, who didn’t retweet amusing Trump-related memes or GIFs.

This clearly didn’t happen; too many people were enthralled, entertained, as well as outraged. In a world where events come and go, and where attention is scarce, we need to think again about apathy, indifference, boredom, and other forms of nonaction as doing political work. As for what else is happening, this feels to me like a very hopeful moment if we stay with the counterpublics who counterpoise other forms of belonging and ways of practicing collective life in common to those associated with right-wing populisms and associated forms of racism or sexism. Critique is necessary but not sufficient for these counterpublics; what is also present are hopeful stories that people can attach to and prefigurative actions that make traces of futures present. It comes back to the discussion earlier about the stories we tell about the present—what we choose to attend to and amplify. I’d like to do some work on the formations of hope and hopefulness that emerge and endure in so-called crisis times, in which the present is too often reduced to a simple story about the emergence of a populism. Staying with hope, with the unequal distribution of the sense of possibility, strikes me as a good way of refusing to perform totalizing stories of what the present is.

VW: To conclude, could you expand on the challenges of translating academic conceptualizations of affect to the realm of realpolitik, and how to ‘relocate’ them to conference panels, public discussions, or other spaces that we enter as academics?

BA: I don’t think this is a different kind of challenge to the generic challenge of translating any academic conceptualization to the realm of realpolitik, although even posing the question in these terms assumes a lot about the location of realpolitik and the practice and location of (academic) conceptualizations. I would say, to begin, that conceptualization as practice and

concepts as devices for attuning and noticing have many divergent functions, in addition to doing work in relation to the realm of *realpolitik*. That said, what modes of academic practice are necessary in order to aid the project of interrupting and perhaps reconfiguring—if only in the most minor of ways—the (de)formation of those collective affects that are entwined with, or lead to the perpetuation, of forms of damage and harm? The question is how to translate conceptual work into a disposition—or set of dispositions—that may move people, recognizing that work on affect is a way of understanding people’s attachment and investment in the worlds they are continually making and remaking. Typically, the role has been one of the critic who in a tone often of anger and outrage interrupts and disrupts with the hope of ending or at least pausing something already ongoing. Critique is necessary, but on its own I think it can fail to move people, to offer a world for people to attach to and invest in. We are in an interesting moment when practices of criticism are expanding and what critique is changing as part of a questioning of what’s lost when we relate to the world and others through criticism and as critics. It’s a mistake to equate being critical in this specific sense with being political. New figures and practices are emerging, though, associated in part but not exclusively with work on affective life; the storyteller who tells affect imbued stories about a situation in a way that resonates and moves, for example, or the killjoy—after the work of Sara Ahmed (2017)—who interrupts consensus, or the utopian who diagnoses the tendencies and latencies, futures already on the way, that constitute the present. The first question of translation, then, is thinking through the practice of engagement with others, in the wake of a growing movement away from a practice of criticism based on a hermeneutics of suspicion that relates to the world through what Eve Sedgwick described as a ‘paranoid style of knowing’ (cf. Sedgwick 2003, 123 ff.)

However, I’m not sure it’s possible or desirable, then, to establish any kind of a priori ethos or practice through which to inhabit the spaces of *realpolitik*. It’s not for me to issue guidelines. Partly, because we need to start from the diversity of approaches that are gathered under the name ‘affect theory’. More than that, though, in my own work I’m interested in how the concepts that surround affect enable us to attend to and notice the dynamics of the present in relation to singular circumstances and worlds. It’s obviously a Foucauldian disposition towards what conceptual work can do, and one I’ve tried to perform in relation to my past work on the ‘war on terror’ and current work on the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. This means the question of translation is always *specific*. Finally, it is really important that translation not be reduced to a unidirectional process between two separate spheres—from conceptualization to *realpolitik*. My worry is that work on affect risks becoming ossified, reduced to a series of unsurprising case studies applying affect (or linked concepts such as atmosphere) to this or that substantive topic. What I’m intrigued about at the moment is whether we can ensure the concepts we work with around affect are at risk as they are exposed to different worlds or contexts.

I’ll finish by giving just two examples that have inspired me to try and better inhabit this necessary space of risky conceptual work, both of which center the new problems that thinking and researching and acting with affect can surface, as well as unsettle existing conceptual claims and understandings. Joseph R. Winters’s (2016) *Hope Draped in Black* is a fascinating account of the presence of a specific form of hope and hopefulness—‘melancholic hope’—in a black literary and aesthetic tradition associated with W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and Charles Burnett. For Winter, what is unique about this tradition is that, in the context of the

enduring belief that America follows a trajectory of racial progress, hope becomes productive as it is connected to loss and as the uncomfortable is inhabited and stayed with. I'm reading it alongside and returning to Lauren Berlant's (2011) *Cruel Optimism*—which is present in all my work over the last five years—to try and think through different ways in which dreams and fantasies (in Berlant's case the American Dream, in Winters's the dream of a trajectory of racial progress) are entwined with forms of damage in ways that make the lines between that which sustains and that which harms blurred. What I love about the two books, and I should stress that Winters is not explicitly intervening in debates around affect in the way that Berlant does, is how named affects ('melancholic hope' and 'cruel optimism') become occasions for thinking and feeling questions of the (de)composition of the social. And that as new problems and questions are approached, the archive of what counts as work with an interest in affect changes in productive and disruptive ways—stretching, for example, into the traditions of queer theory and ideology critique Berlant is in dialogue with, or expanding into the black political-aesthetic tradition Winters writes about in conjunction with the Frankfurt school. Both books are full of translations between work on affect and other partially connected fields and scenes. What I learn from this work is to try and remain unsettled in our conceptualizations of affect, to practice translation as an ongoing process.

RM: To me an important point in any attempt of translating affect theory to realpolitik is that affect theory should not be understood and not be conducted as an objectivating science, where a putatively disinterested researcher-subject with a putatively waterproof methodology looks from a detached position onto reality out there. Affect theory is to me always a form of involved and situated theorizing in a rather humble sense.

This has a variety of implications. To start with, it means that researchers are involved with their own affectivity in their theorizing. While traditional science which is following the idea of an epistemological 'subject-object split' sees this as a problem and tries to eradicate any subjective components from scholarly insight, in affect theory this is *not* a deficiency but a gain and a method. Being affectively involved provides a new sensorium for scientific insight; if affect-theoretical concepts correlate to affective experience, this is a way of equipping concepts with a deep layer of intuition that prevents them from being 'blind concepts'. Of course, this becomes scholarly work only in the moment when it doesn't boil down to mere subjectivism or relativism. Preventing this is the tough job of affect-theoretical methodology—which in my view often fails. Methodologically, the challenge is to establish *shared* intuitions and articulations not by means of abstraction but neither by means of merely attitudinal attunement, but by deep communication, sharing, and discussion of research results.

In my view, the community of affect scholars (to which I have an ambivalent relationship) sometimes falls in the trap of indulging in a certain esotericism and creating a specific 'reality bubble' ourselves. This is one of the reasons for my plea to go on the streets and seek confrontation, especially if one is researching a subject that concerns others (such as in the case of right-wing populist affects, which I really just do not feel myself so that it is hard to actually have a nonspeculative and nonprojecting intuition of what's really going on in those people). As problematic as it may sound, I think that researching these subjectivities and their affects means exposing oneself to their bodily presence, because only then can I use my own body with its

affective sensitivities as a seismographic instrument to see what these other bodies can do (to me) affectively and how their violence, hatred, resentments, etc., work. For me this strategy of self-exposure is a core methodology. Its prerequisite is to always try to know yourself, know your sensitivities, resonance points, dissonance tendencies, traumas, and trigger points, so that based on this knowledge you can use your body as a sensor or a measuring device for affective dynamics around you—but of which you are a constitutive part in the moment you enter the field.

Another implication is that in my opinion, affect-theoretical descriptions cannot be evaluated by a universal truth-value but they find their reality by the criterion of their (political) efficacy. Whether an affect-theoretical description is adequate or not is a matter of what it enables the subject to do, or to see, differently. How much does a certain concept, a certain description help someone to an emancipating insight or to an empowering articulation of what's going on with me and with others? It is problematic if one tries to talk about *others'* affects from an external perspective in a judging fashion—that is, in a discourse to which the affected persons are only an object. Here I agree with Ben's point on the (limited) role of criticism. Of course, you *can* talk about others' affects, but had better do it in a way that is *addressing them*, that is interested in *their* emancipation or transformation, or in getting to know them better by making them speak. Following this approach, it is not on us as scholars to tell people the 'truth' about their affects, their subjectivities, their politics. Our game is to provide concepts and descriptions that resonate with others' experience and might prove helpful in someone's own process of emancipation.

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