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Introduction: Negative emotions in dark times

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We have much to be emotional about right now. In writing moment, a pandemic is upon us, with attendant political and economic crises. Among the emotions this has evoked, fear is indisputably the most palpable and discussed (e.g. Freedland 2020), along with its siblings anxiety and panic. But there is also frustration and anger, for example, at slow or insufficient government actions. And those who have already lost loved ones will of course feel sadness and grief. These are indeed dark times, casting a deep shadow over, or perhaps shadowed by, our inner lives.

Negative emotions are, thus, on the political centre stage of this pandemic. Some of their consequences have been destructive – fuelling, for instance, panic buying and xenophobia against Chinese people. Yet others have been constructive. Fear is among the reasons why people around the world are heeding government advice and orders to stay at home and avoid social contact. Ordinarily, such fearful obedience would be antithetical to democracy. At present, however, this fearful obedience forms a crucial part of the bulwark against the worst effects of COVID-19, perhaps saving countless lives – which is not to dismiss the importance of keeping this tendency in careful check. Moreover, in response to the fear and anxiety, we are seeing people across our society – in the health sector but far beyond as well – find courage and solidarity with others, as well as ways to support each other even when the kinds of physical togetherness that we associate with liberal-democratic politics are not possible. We are, in effect, seeing examples of the very bivalence of negative emotions that this issue sets out to explore.

This issue was conceived long before ‘Corona’ became a household name for disease and death, and before we could have imagined the kinds of unprecedented political responses to the crisis that we are seeing presently. But while this issue does not deal directly with these phenomena, the politics of negative emotions *is* directly relevant to understanding them. The last few years have of course hardly been an era of harmony, pervaded by love and compassion. It has been a period in which populism – primarily, or at least most successfully, of the right – has been surging, empowering strongmen across the world, but also giving rise to unexpected political changes, like Brexit and the US Democratic Party’s turn to the left. The subtitle of this introduction – ‘Negative emotions in dark times’ – deliberately positions this issue within the literature theorising these recent political events. David Runciman (2018), one of the most influential political theorists in Britain today, suggested in a recent book that our current political trajectory may portend the end of democracy. Negative emotions – especially

anger and fear – are central to understanding how we have gotten to this point, according to many scholars and commentators in the media. They well may be right.

Still, it is worth reflecting on what seems a noticeable shift in political scholarship on emotions. Not that long ago, the emphasis was on rehabilitating the emotions in politics. For many this was primarily a matter of acknowledging the role of emotions in the public sphere, and thereby allowing them to become an object of study (see Goodwin et al. 2001). In other words, the rehabilitation of the emotions was seen by some as a descriptive exercise or a widening of the scientific scope – albeit unavoidably with normative implications. For others, however, the rehabilitation of emotions was an explicitly normative exercise, aimed at demonstrating their morally and politically constructive potential. Political theorists were among the leading voices in these efforts. While love, compassion, joy, and other positive emotions were among the objects of focus, so were negative emotions, such as anger, fear, and grief. Scholars have argued that such experiences and their expressions were critical resources for marginalized individuals in their struggles to address injustices (Ferry and Kingston 2008; Thompson and Hoggett 2012), and that the political delegitimization of anger and other feelings has maintained the subordination of these people (Laclau 2005; Gould 2010).

Partly because of these efforts, the term ‘negative emotions’ has become controversial among some scholars, as the contributions of this issue reflect. To them, it implies that the emotions that fall – or, perhaps more accurately, are gathered – within this category are bad, morally or politically, and that it is, therefore, a label best avoided. Contestations over what experiences count as negative emotions is of course itself an important what we are here referring to as ‘the politics of negative emotions’. But the category need not imply any moral judgment on the experiences within it; it can and has accommodated both ‘good’ and ‘bad’ emotions, something which the contributions in this issue also highlight.

Now, however, the rehabilitation of negative emotions, at least in the normative sense, has seemingly stalled. Notably, Martha Nussbaum, long one of the leading advocates of emotions in politics, has now become one of the staunchest critics of negative emotions. While Nussbaum’s defence of negative emotions was never unqualified and she has long raised concerns about some of them, the force of her recent denunciations is nevertheless striking. In *The Monarchy of Fear* (2018), for example, she tells a story in which fear is a leading villain – abetted by anger, disgust, and envy – in the decline of liberal democracy. Fear is, according to her, immature, narcissistic, and antisocial, qualities that render it poisonous to liberal-democratic citizenship and institutions. While Nussbaum’s book is among the most sustained and extensive recent indictment of negative emotions in politics, many other prominent political thinkers – including Runciman – draw on similar types of reasoning. And we see the influence of these ideas in the news media, where blaming undesirable political events and movements on some negative emotion is a popular exercise (e.g. Green 2016; Keohane 2015; Mason 2018). Some of these concerns are warranted. But the vilification of negative emotions also threatens to strike at the ability of disadvantaged and marginalized individuals to participate in politics, people whose words and actions are more likely than others to be considered emotional.

What makes this trend in political thought even more worrying is that our scientific knowledge of emotions appears to be built on epistemically shaky foundations. Among the key problems is quite simply that identifying what emotions people really have is much more difficult than

Paul Ekman – the most influential living expert on emotions – and the legions who have followed in his footsteps and drawn on his findings have cared to admit (Leys 2017, esp. Ch. 2). This is a problem of which Hannah Arendt (e.g. 2006 [1963]) was well aware. Consequently, she stressed the dangers involved in basing our understanding of and participation in politics on what people’s authentic emotions are (see also Degerman 2019). There are hence good reasons eschew the totalizing the critiques of negative emotions that have become so common in recent years, along with the epistemic arrogance involved in projecting particular emotions on millions of people, as such critiques often do.

In these dark times, a more suitable attitude or virtue to assume in trying to understand the role of negative emotions in politics seems to be one of epistemic humility. With its help, we may find a way out of the political cul-de-sac of explanations that reduce public life to one or a few destructive emotions, explanations that not only threaten to disempower marginalized groups but also to devalue people’s professed reasons, beliefs, and ideas, and, ultimately, seemingly promise little more than to exacerbate political divisions and animosity.

The contributions of this issue, which reflect a variety of disciplines and experiences from across the world, all express the virtue of epistemic humility. Together, they explore a range of negative emotions, drawing out both constructive and destructive potentials of these experiences. The result is a dynamic set of tools that can help us understand and find our way through our current crises.

Given the leading role that anger has played both in the politics and the political analysis of the past few years, it is apt that the issue opens with interventions on anger and its subspecies. Challenging the recent wave of criticism, each of these pieces seeks to, in different ways, highlight the constructive potential of anger in politics, at least in certain forms. In his opening essay, William Davies (2020) borrows Daniel Kahneman’s famous distinction between fast and slow thinking to develop a distinction between fast and slow anger. Whereas slow anger accrues over time in response to perceived injustices, fast anger arises automatically, without deliberation, spurring physical action and reaction. Demagogical politicians have recently showed great skill in using fast anger to focus people’s attention on the present, obliterating deposits of slow anger. Nevertheless, Davies argues that the two forms of anger need to be combined in order to satiate, and substantively address, political anger. Expressing enthusiastic support for Davies’ effort, Jeremy Engels (2020), drawing on his academic research as well as his experiences as a meditation and yoga teacher, emphasizes the need reflect on our anger in order to understand its sources and solutions, political or otherwise.

Karen Adkins (2020) sets out a more direct defense of political anger against its critics, focusing on Martha Nussbaum’s (2016) recent account. Adkins maintains Nussbaum fails to recognize the connection between dignity and anger, particularly in its expression as ‘liberatory anger’ by marginalized individuals and groups. Nussbaum may in fact leave room for something like this type of anger, Lori Keleher (2020) observes in her response. But for Keleher, this is somewhat beside the point, because, channeling Aristotle, she argues that anger is in fact morally neutral. Hence, much like Engels, she concludes that the key consideration is how to respond to anger, not whether it is good or bad to be angry.

While acknowledging the political importance of anger, Mary Carman (2020) contends that too little attention has been paid to its sibling, frustration. According to Carman, frustration is clearly connected anger, but conceptually distinct, and morally and politically important for

particular reasons, which she unpacks using the example of the recent South African Student Protests. Paul Muldoon (2020) replies that, though he agrees with aspects of Carman's analysis, she overemphasizes the moral significance of how long the obstacles that cause frustration have persisted. According to Muldoon, the nature of the obstacles is at least as central, and frustration is only morally relevant if the obstacles that cause it are the result of neglect or malice.

Anger – or frustration – is of course far from the only negative emotions at play in politics. Martha Claeys (2020) explores the moral and political implications of 'green shame', defining it as 'the shame one feels when knowingly behaving in ways that have a severe negative impact on the environment'. Contrary to much political thinking on shame, she argues that 'green shame' is politically desirable, because it can further the 'greening of society'. In his reply, Udo Pesch (2020) recognizes the merits of Claeys' case for this particular species of shame but warns against demanding that people be ashamed of their climate footprint. Green shame, he stresses, can be a starting point for political debate and government intervention, yet it cannot be their end.

Ditte-Marie Munch-Juriscic (2020) also draws our attention to a less prominent emotion – or what some would call a feeling – namely, discomfort. While we are attracted to and, most of us, are probably living in increasing comfort, Munch-Juriscic argues that in pursuit of a more fair and equal society, we are dutybound 'to expose ourselves to discomfort', and more specifically a type of emotional experience that she calls 'interaction discomfort'. Michael Ure (2020) disagrees with Munch-Juriscic on several points and sets these out in his reply.

The contributions discussed so far offer careful philosophical analyses and distinctions between different kinds of negative emotion. They do so largely in order to highlight the political promises of negative emotions, contesting the tendency to deplore this category of experience. Arguably, however, even such exercises, even when performed in the spirit of epistemic humility may fuel epistemic arrogance. It is therefore suitable that Sjoerd van Tuinen (2020) in his contribution warns precisely against efforts to impose neat distinctions between politically good emotions and bad emotion, by exploring the uses and abuses of the distinction between resentment and ressentiment in liberal political thought. In her reply, Elisabetta Brighi (2020) takes a critical view of van Tuinen's analysis of resentment.

Next the issue takes an empirical turn. This also happens to entail a shift in emphasis, from the constructive potential of negative emotions to their political abuses and abusers. Examining the publications and visual media of a Norwegian extreme far-right organization, Søren Mosgaard Andreasen (2020) shows how fear – or more specifically, what he terms, 'fear appeals' – is used to legitimize exclusion, policing, and humiliation of Muslims among far-right activists and sympathizers, something which, unavoidably, has implications for society more broadly. Agreeing with this analysis, Mattias Ekman (2020), in his reply, extends it to social media, highlighting how representations of Muslims on these platforms contribute the construction of an 'enemy body' that stokes and attracts fear and hate.

Defying critical assessments of Nussbaum's work on emotions, Iida Pyy, Anniina Leiviskä, and Jan-Erik Mansikka (2020) show that it can be used to understand how negative and positive emotions influence democratic values. They do so by applying Nussbaum's ideas to explore another case study from the Nordics, specifically, the banning of asylum seekers' visits to schools in Oulu, Finland. Responding, Anne-Kathrin Weber (2020) acknowledges that

the Oulu case holds important insights, but she questions the authors' heavy reliance on Nussbaum, suggesting that they overlook several problems in her conceptualization of emotions.

Next, Anna Meuweisse and Sara Kalm (2020) utilize theoretical and sociological work on social movements to analyse their first-hand observations from the 2019 conference of the World Congress of Families, a prominent international right-wing organization. In the process, they shed new light on how emotions fuels political agency. Building on their insights, Simon Koschut explores some broader issues around collective emotions and social movements in his reply.

In the issue's last research article, Julia Leser and Florian Spissinger draw on extensive field research to analyse the emotional practices of the German political party *Alternative für Deutschland*, showing that the party effectively mobilizes both negative and positive emotions to legitimise their claims. Responding to their analysis, Fabian Virchow explores the distinction between positive and negative emotions, and its relevance to the study of far-right politics.

Rounding off the issue, Remco van der Stoep of the think-tank Compass and the Green Party presents a policy response to the issue, while Eleanor Jupp and Elliott Johnson review William Davies' *Nervous States: How feeling took over the world* (2019), and, finally, the author responds to their criticisms.

Together, these contributions form a much-needed set of interdisciplinary toolset for navigating our current, emotion-laced crises, as well as those that are unavoidably on the horizon.

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