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Eco-activism and Fear: Some Feminist Insights about Affect and Agency in Catastrophic Times

LÉNA SILBERZAHN

ABSTRACT As we face multiple crises–particularly the climate crisis–the question arises as to how to conduct politics in the shadow of disaster without sliding into authoritarianism. Indeed, the opposition between fear and freedom is a common assumption among political theorists, and so is the close relationship between fear and authoritarianism. This essay seeks to understand how negative emotional experiences such as fear can be collectively addressed and used as a resource by social movements. In the first part, I argue that malestream theoretical frameworks treat fear as pathology, failing to understand and conceptualize the subtle interplay between so-called "negative affects", and the political thought and action that could take shape (and sometimes already exists) in ecological politics nowadays. The second part draws on feminist affect studies and feminist practices of consciousness raising to sketch alternative stories of what fearful and angry bodies can do. Throughout the article, I explore how anxiety, fear and despair, far from leading to powerlessness and manipulation, can become indicators of our interconnectedness, recreating and reminding us of ties and forms of belonging that have been destroyed or forgotten. Expressed, lived, and transformed in empowering affective arrangements, they become a resource for a new kind of collective agency, and can generate the critical thinking necessary fight against disaster capitalism.

KEYWORDS Fear, affect, feminist politics, ecology, activism

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"We are gathering at the Pentagon on November 17 because we fear for our lives. We fear for the life of this planet, our Earth, and the life of our children who are our human future" Unity Statement of the Women's Pentagon Action

"Sadness. Fear. Anger. I think it's impossible for anyone to understand the state of the earth without feeling these emotions." Donella Meadows, 1997

"I don't want your hope; I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic, I want you to feel the fear I feel every day." Greta Thunberg, 2019

Ecological disasters are on the rise, and trigger emotional responses such as anger, fear and grief. These emotions can result in political apathy, or morph into political movements of denial or deferral.[1] On the one hand, feelings of hopelessness and fear, political thinkers across times tell us, provide fertile ground for reactionary politics, powerlessness, and manipulated crowds.[2] On the other hand, these affective states are common among climate activists.[3] In fact,

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[1] Kari Marie Norgaard, "'People Want to Protect Themselves a Little Bit': Emotions, Denial, and Social Movement Nonparticipation," *Sociological Inquiry* 76, no. 3 (August 1, 2006): 372–396; Paul Robbins and Sarah A. Moore, "Ecological Anxiety Disorder: Diagnosing the Politics of the Anthropocene," *cultural geographies* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 3–19; Matthew Adams, "Inaction and Environmental Crisis: Narrative, Defense Mechanisms and the Social Organisation of Denial," *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 19, no. 1 (April 2014): 52–71; Sally Weintrobe, *Psychological Roots of the Climate Crisis: Neoliberal Exceptionalism and the Culture of Uncare*, Psychoanalytic Horizons (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

[2] See for example Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu* (Firmin-Didot frères, fils et Cie (Paris), 1857); Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Franz L. Neumann, "Anxiety and Politics," *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 15, no. 2 (June 27, 2017): 612–636; Ruth Wodak, *Politik mit der Angst: Zur Wirkung rechtspopulistischer Diskurse* (Wien Hamburg: Edition Konturen, 2016).

[3] Jochen Kleres and Åsa Wettergren, "Fear, Hope, Anger, and Guilt in Climate Activism," *Social Movement Studies* 16, no. 5 (September 3, 2017): 507–519; Sighard Neckel and Martina Hasenfratz, "Climate Emotions and Emotional Climates: The Emotional Map of Ecological Crises and the Blind Spots on Our Sociological Landscapes," *Social Science Information* (April 8, 2021): 0539018421996264; Louise Knops, 'Stuck between the Modern and the Terrestrial: The Indignation of the Youth for Climate Movement', *Political Research Exchange* 3, no. 1 (1 January 2021): e1868946, https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2020.1868946.

the affective implications[4] and dimensions of the ongoing climate chaos remain widely underexplored, and we lack understandings and conceptualizations of the critical productivity of fear. While more and more political theorists have embraced conceptions of agency as "affected."[5] and have even reconsidered the role of negative affects for anticapitalist politics,[6] fear remains an exception. What other stories are to be told about frightened bodies? This contribution is part of the marginal but growing body of scholarship that puts forward the idea that beyond data and macropolitical shifts, the current climate crisis has implications (and will require organizing) on the micropolitical, affective level as well. I will argue that feminist theories and practices can deliver key insights about affect and agency in catastrophic times.

In the first part, I argue that recognizing the ambivalence of fear and other sad passions in political movements is an important step towards a better understanding political agency in the age of climate chaos. As I show, many of the tools of political thinking, however, work against the possibility of nuanced theoretical and practical concern for negative affect, especially for fear. In the second part, I draw on feminist affect studies and practices of consciousness raising to show that in given affective arrangements, fear and despair can open worlds and nurture emancipatory collective agencies.

CATASTROPHIC TIMES AND POWERLESSNESS

Feeling Bad in the Anthropocene

Dealing with the affective reality of environmental politics means – amongst other things – dealing with its negativity. As opposed to social movements that have defined political

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[4] While I do not embrace the sharp distinction between affect and emotion defended by Brian Massumi for example, I tend to use the word affect to refer to dynamics and intensities beyond what is reflexively grasped by individuals, and emotion to refer to a more precise and subjective experience, which often includes a cognitive assessment. Following queer-feminist works (notably Ahmed 2014), I'm interested in the role of sensations, bodily and psychic experiences in politics – regardless of whether we call them affects, feelings, or emotions.

[5] Notably, Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2006); Dorothy H. B. Kwek, "Power and the Multitude: A Spinozist View," *Political Theory* 43, no. 2 (April 1, 2015): 155–184.

[6] For a recent example, see Claudia Leeb, "Rebelling Against Suffering in Capitalism," *Contemporary Political Theory* 17, no. 3 (2018): 263–282.

modernity since the late 18th century, postwar environmental movements present narratives that mobilize in order to avoid a disaster, rather than promise a bright future.[7] Accordingly, "negative" emotions – I will get back to the precautionary quotation marks later – constitute a major issue for individuals who deal with environmental issues daily. Of course, it would be naïve to consider "bad feelings" as a new issue for social movements, as despair, melancholia, anger, disillusion, or shame – although rarely thematized – have always been inherent to political struggle.[8] However, the overwhelming nature of the ongoing ecological devastation, and the unprecedented darkening of the future that accompanies it, seem to trigger new kinds of political powerlessness and anxiety. Climate activists and scientists have increasingly spoken out about the difficulty of working daily with "the end of the world,"[9] climate-related depression[10] or "climate burnout."[11] While neologisms such as "ecoanxiety" or "solastalgia"[12]

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[7] Carl Cassegård and Håkan Thörn, "Toward a Postapocalyptic Environmentalism? Responses to Loss and Visions of the Future in Climate Activism," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 1, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): 561–578.

[8] Deborah Gould, "Political despair," in *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies*, ed. Simon Thompson and Paul Hoggett (New York: Continuum Publishing Corporation, 2012); Jeff Goodwin, "Emotion Work in High-Risk Social Movements: Managing Fear in the U.S. and East German Civil Rights Movements," in *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, ed. Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (University of Chicago Press, 2001); Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[9] John H. Richardson, "When the End of Human Civilization Is Your Day Job," *Esquire*, last modified July 7, 2015, accessed May 7, 2018, https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a36228/ballad-of-the-sad-climatologists-0815/.

[10] Lesley Head and Theresa Harada, "Keeping the Heart a Long Way from the Brain: The Emotional Labour of Climate Scientists," *Emotion, Space and Society* 24, On trauma, geography, and mobility: Towards geographies of trauma (August 1, 2017): 34–41; Paul Hoggett and Rosemary Randall, "Engaging with Climate Change: Comparing the Cultures of Science and Activism," *Environmental Values* 27, no. 3 (2018): 223–243.

[11] Forest Watkins, "Hope and Burnout in the Anthropocene," *Common Dreams*, last modified 2016, accessed May 12, 2018, https://www.commondreams.org/views/2016/05/26/hope-and-burnout-anthropocene.

[12] Solastalgia is a neologism invented by Glenn Albrecht to describe "the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation). It is manifest in an attack on one's sense of place, in the erosion of the sense of belonging (identity) to a particular place and a feeling of distress (psychological desolation) about its transformation. Solastalgia is not about looking back to some golden past, nor is it about seeking another place as 'home'. It is the 'lived experience' of the loss of the present as

provide an attempt to name this new affective reality, made of loss, powerlessness, and a disrupted sense of continuity and belonging, the political implications of these phenomena remain, however, undertheorized, and understudied. There seems to be a mismatch between the lived experiences of ecological fear and other affective states linked to the ongoing disaster, and the relative silence about them in the literature.

Now Affects, and especially, fear, are not new concepts in political theory, and political theorists would be tempted to use existing accounts of emotions and passions in politics to better grasp the affective dynamics of our catastrophic times. However, as I will argue, many of the tools of political thinking work against the possibility of theoretical and practical concern for negative affect in nowadays' politics.

"Malestream" accounts of political fear and other sad passions

I argue that traditional malestream conceptions of fear and other negative affects in politics impede our thinking, because they conceive them as subpolitical and pathological phenomena, with antidemocratic consequences, rather than conceptualize the ambivalent, and even emancipatory ways in which these affects could shape politics. While philosophers and political thinkers have been stressing that the instrumentalization of affect is at the heart of politics for centuries,[13] affects themselves, and affective responses, have often been depicted as biological, subpolitical reactions of passive subjects. This may be the consequence of the wider, traditional reluctance of mainstream and "malestream" theory to acknowledge the political nature of affects and emotions. To that regard, feminist works have often pointed out the

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manifest in a feeling of dislocation; of being undermined by forces that destroy the potential for solace to be derived from the present. In short, solastalgia is a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home'." G. Albrecht, "Solastalgia: A New Concept in Human Health and Identity," *Philosophy Activism Nature* 3 (2005): 41–55. Ecoanxiety has burgeoned as concept after 2015. It is described by the American Psychological Association as "a chronic fear of environmental doom," (APA 2017, 68) and can be traced back to Lisa Leff, "Ecology Carries Clout in Anne Arundel," *Washington Post*, 5 August 1990, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1990/08/05/ecology-carries-clout-in-anne-arundel/a01f0325-e1bf-4f25-b180-65bc4540ef0c/.

[13] Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Montesquieu, *Oeuvres complètes de Montesquieu*; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan. Traité de la matière, de la forme et du pouvoir de la république ecclésiastique et civile*, trans. François Tricaud (Paris: Sirey, 1971).

exclusionary logic of the "liberal dispositive of feeling,"[14] which is grounded in a set of gendered, connected and mutually reinforcing dichotomies between feeling and thinking, body and mind, passive and active, private and public.[15] The prevalence of these dichotomies, which are, in fact, gendered *hierarchies*, giving higher value and prestige to what is traditionally identified as male, has led to dismissive and pathologizing accounts of affect and those considered to be affected in the political realm. While crowd psychology, reducing the emotional politics of movements and emotional people to expressions of irrational and savage masses,[16] lost its influence, labelling movements and people as "emotional" is still a way to discredit them,[17] "emotionality" being constantly assigned to othered populations, such as women or people of color, to delegitimize their right to appear and be heard.

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[14] Birgit Sauer, "Politik wird mit dem Kopfe gemacht. Überlegungen zu einer geschlechtersensiblen Politologie der Gefühle," in *Masse — Macht — Emotionen: Zu einer politischen Soziologie der Emotionen*, ed. Ansgar Klein and Frank Nullmeier (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1999), 200–218; Brigitte Bargetz and Birgit Sauer, "Politics, Emotion and the Transformation of the Political. Critical Feminist Perspectives," *Osterreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 39 (January 1, 2010): 141–155.

[15] For a feminist critique of masculine "rationality" as pillar of politics and ethics, and an analysis of how logocentric, disembodied and deliberative models of politics have often served to exclude so-called emotional—therefore not capable of reason and power—people, often women, from the public sphere, see, for example: Alison Jaggar, *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. Adam Sitze and Amanda Minervini (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016); Val Plumwood, "Nature, Self, and Gender: Feminism, Environmental Philosophy, and the Critique of Rationalism," *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (1991): 3–27; Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Revised edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Sauer, "Politik wird mit dem Kopfe gemacht."

[16] Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules* (UltraLetters, 2013).

[17] Craig Calhoun, "Putting Emotions in Their Place," in *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*, ed. Jeff Goodwin, James M. Jasper, and Francesca Polletta (University of Chicago Press, 2001).

This is all the more true for fear,[18] which is conceived of as an unpolitical, biological reaction, a "primal, and so to speak, subpolitical emotion" in the words of Raymond Aron.[19] Biological and physiological descriptions of fear in politics go hand in hand with its pathologization, mobilizing imaginaries of "poison," "contagion," and "containment." As Nussbaum has written recently, "fear has a strong tendency to get ahead of us, propelling us into selfish, heedless, and antisocial actions. […] More than other emotions, fear needs careful scrutiny and containment if it is not to turn poisonous."[20]

In terms of political consequences, fear is systematically described as the breeding ground and pillar of despotism,[21] far right populism[22] or authoritarianism.[23] It is portrayed as an impediment to democratic will formation: "only a fearless man can decide freely,"[24] as Franz Neumann wrote in his famous "Anxiety and Politics." His analyses exemplify a line of argument that is often mobilized by political theorists who study fear. The argument goes like this: when as a group is threatened by loss of status without understanding the details of the process which leads to its degradation, the group hopes for its deliverance from distress through ego-surrender (affective identification with what Neumann calls a caesaristic leader), while anxiety intensifies into persecutory anxiety against certain persons, who are thought to have brought this distress into the world through a conspiracy. Anxiety is then become institutionalized

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[18] I have in mind the distinction that is usually operated between fear and anxiety. Kierkegaard, notably, famously wrote that fear relates to a particular object, while anxiety has no object (1844). However, I take this distinction to be challenged by the phenomenon of climate fear: while it is a specific kind of fear, the unpredictability and scale of climate threats is such that it could probably qualify as anxiety. One could argue it is a "liquid fear" of our global age, characterized by insecurity, the difficulty of identifying a clear cause, and the perception of losing control (Bauman 2006).

[19] Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought: Montesquieu, Comte, Marx, Tocqueville and the Sociologists and the Revolution of 1848*, 1st edition. (New Brunswick, NJ: Routledge, 1998). Quoted in Robin, *Fear*.

[20] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at Our Political Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 6.

[21] "As virtue is necessary in a republic, and in a monarchy honor, so fear is necessary in a despotic government." *The spirit of Laws*, Chap. IX. "Of the Principle of despotic Government"

[22] Norma Rossi, "The Politics of Anxiety and the Rise of Far-Right Parties in Europe," in *Politics of Anxiety*, ed. Emmy Eklundh (London: RLI, 2018); Ruth Wodak, *Politik mit der Angst: Zur Wirkung rechtspopulistischer Diskurse* (Wien Hamburg: Edition Konturen, 2016).

[23] Franz L. Neumann, "Anxiety and Politics," *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 15, no. 2 (27 June 2017): 612–36.

[24] Neumann, "Anxiety and Politics," 612.

through terror and propaganda to maintain the leader-identification.[25] In this account of fear, which is widely shared amongst political theorists, the *subject of fear* is fatalistically paralyzed or manipulated,[26] while the *politics of fear* are fatalistically authoritarian and racist. These theoretical lenses, and the fear-authoritarianism nexus they mobilize, is largely echoed in accounts of climate fear. However, I argue that this leads to a political and affective deadlock.

The fear-authoritarianism nexus in political theory

In the realm of environmental issues, philosophers and politicians have often depicted the expression of fear related to ecological issues as manipulative doomsaying with antidemocratic objectives: irrational, or at least leading to irrational action.[27] At best, expressions of fear and appeals to fear have been characterized as elements in a realistic, but ineffective rhetoric leading to apathy.[28] In the same manner, tropes of "hysterical wives" and "angry black women" have been used to delegitimize women's claims to rights, participation, and access to politics, and new generations of ecoactivists have been delegitimized in reference to their age and their emotionality by the bourgeois and/or authoritarian propaganda.

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[25] Neumann, "Anxiety and Politics."

[26] Neumann is certainly less dismissive of affected citizens than approaches in crowd psychology, from which he distanced himself. While addressing this issue would exceed the scope of my essay, I maintain that he however reproduces the narrative of irrational manipulated crowds. As Axel Honneth argues, his "distinction between forms of affective identification and those that function without the support of affective elements gives rise to the misleading impression that a group's bond could somehow be emotionless and purely conviction-based [and rely on a model where] […] affects or emotions are completely equated with irrational powers." Axel Honneth, "'Anxiety and Politics': The Strengths and Weaknesses of Franz Neumann's Diagnosis of a Social Pathology," *Constellations* 10, no. 2 (2003): 247–55.

[27] Luc Ferry, "Faire changer la peur de camp," June 27, 2016, accessed September 27, 2018, https://www.agriculture-environnement.fr/2016/06/27/luc-ferry-faire-changer-la-peur-de-camp; Michael Foessel, *Après la fin du monde : Critique de la raison apocalyptique* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2012); P. Gosselin, "The Climate Catastrophism Cult," 2011, accessed January 26, 2019, http://notrickszone.com/2011/02/12/the-climate-catastrophism-cult/.

[28] Saffron O'Neill and Sophie Nicholson-Cole, "'Fear Won't Do It': Promoting Positive Engagement with Climate Change through Visual and Iconic Representations," *Science Communication* 30, no. 3 (March 1, 2009): 355–379; Sasha Lilley et al., *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth* (Oakland, California: PM Press, 2012); Catherine Larrere and Raphael Larrere, *Le pire n'est pas certain* (Premier Parallèle, 2020).

Tellingly, Greta Thunberg's visit to the French parliament has been analyzed as "symbol of a country where emotion takes precedence over reason" by the country's conservative press, while she was declared a "hysteric."[29]

To be sure, this is not only the fault of bad-faith political theorists with a desire to pathologize negative affective states. First, conservative's logic of defamation relies on a wide range of strategies and rhetorical devices, most of which are – whether we like it or not – indifferent to quarrels in political theory. Second, whether you call it the *end of utopia*,[30] or *left melancholy*,[31] narratives of apocalyptic future from the last decades have indisputably been draining out energies that could have gone into mobilization, sometimes with depoliticizing effects.[32]

One answer has been to call for "institutions promotional of joyful passions among the masses in order for democracy to be realized,"[33] or "a more joyful and empowering concept of desire and for a political economy that foregrounds positivity, not gloom."[34] Indeed, some contemporary affect theorists suggest that subjects rebel out of joy and other positive feelings.[35] Recent attempts to call for the "the enchantment of modern life,"[36] to theorize a "charming

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[29] "Greta Thunberg: quand l'écologie préfère le culte de l'indignation à la science," *Le Figaro*, accessed 28 July 2021, https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/politique/greta-thunberg-quand-l-ecologie-prefere-le-culte-de-l-indignation-a-la-science-20190722.

[30] Russell Jacoby, *The End Of Utopia: Politics and Culture in an Age of Apathy* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Herbert Marcuse, *Psychoanalyse Und Politik* (Europäische Verlagsanst., 1968).

[31] Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy," *boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (October 1, 1999): 19–27.

[32] Erik Swyngedouw, "Apocalypse Now! Fear and Doomsday Pleasures," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 24 (March 1, 2013).

[33] Hasana Sharp, "Why Spinoza Today? Or, 'A Strategy of Anti-Fear,'" *Rethinking Marxism* 17, no. 4 (October 1, 2005): 591–608.

[34] Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2002).

[35] Michael Hardt et al., "A Dialogue with Michael Hardt on Revolution, Joy, and Learning to Let Go," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (August 10, 2020): 1–14.

[36] Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Anthropocene,"[37] "politics of environmental desire"[38] or "politics of marvel"[39] could be read that way. However, political forces seem to be caught in an affective deadlock: on the face of it, climate change is *indisputably apocalyptic*, yet we are told to be "charmed" and "marvelled," because making room for our fear would result in *paralysis* and might even strengthen racist and reactionary politics. Indeed, people sensitive to climate issues find themselves in a disturbing situation, where sharing information that will make their listeners react emotionally is *both desirable and proscribed*.

The question arises as to how to conduct lucid politics in the shadow of disaster without sliding into powerlessness or authoritarian politics. More precisely, the question I would like to raise is: *Once we acknowledge that our future is indeed apocalyptic and frightening, how do we theorize and conduct politics in emancipatory ways?* The narrative of fear as antidemocratic device seems to obscure the ambivalent ways in which it shapes – or could shape – political agency. In the era of the sixth extinction, I argue feminist thinkers' invitation to dwell in our sad passions and assume projects of mourning as resources for ethics and politics might help to complement and challenge these views. In our catastrophic times, we need different a different understanding of what frightened bodies can do.

FEAR AND EMANCIPATION: SOME FEMINIST INSIGHTS

In the foregoing section, I have defended two claims: First, the ecological devastation has affective consequences, comprising of fear and despair. Second, the hierarchical feeling/knowing opposition depicts those experiencing fear as powerless and manipulated. Here I am concerned with the question: How can we envision emancipatory activism under conditions of rising anxiety and fears? What if our loss of agency was, amongst others, a symptom of how we conceive of agency in the first place?

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[37] Holly Jean Buck, "On the Possibilities of a Charming Anthropocene," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 105, no. 2 (March 4, 2015): 369–377.

[38] Lida Maxwell, "Queer/Love/Bird Extinction: Rachel Carson's Silent Spring as a Work of Love," *Political Theory* 45, no. 5 (October 1, 2017): 682–704.

[39] Baptiste Morizot, *Manières d'être vivant: Enquêtes sur la vie à travers nous*, ed. Stéphane Durand (Arles: Actes Sud, 2020).

Bad feelings as resource for politics

A growing body of affect theories has contested pathologizing accounts of affect, offering new possibilities for analyzing the politics of embodied, embedded, and affected subjectivities beyond the pathos/logos dichotomy. Drawing on Spinoza and Deleuze, many scholars participating in the "turn to affect" have underlined that the potentialities of bodies always include their *receptive* capacities,[40] putting forward visions of power and agency as *Being-Affected*, and as *Sensitivity*: "Power is not just sheer efficacy or imposition of will, but rather involves a capacity for being affected [...] it is only by ceaselessly being-affected by other finite realities that a body continues to cohere as a reality."[41] The concept of the "*power-to-be-affected*" (Deleuze), notably, opens interesting alternatives to malestream conceptions of affected bodies.

However, fear remains antithetical to reason and to democracy, even amongst those who have contributed to establishing *being affected* as a central aspect of being human and engaging in politics. Drawing on Spinoza's famous distinction between joyful and sad affects, some studies have contributed to freezing this distinction, celebrating the former while pathologizing the latter as antidemocratic, inefficient and paralyzing: As an example, Hasana Sharp writes that "fear/along with other 'sad passions' like hate, anxiety, and envy/undermines democratic institutions, bringing as much harm to the state as to its constituents."[42] In a similar vein, Ericka Tucker affirms:

Emotions like hatred, anger, fear and even hope diminish humans' power of thinking and acting, leading us to make worse decisions, have less reasonable ideas than if we had emotions based on pleasure such as joy or love. Further, Spinoza insists, when our power is diminished, and when we experience the emotions of fear and anger, we tend to be at odds with one another.[43]

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[40] Michael Hardt, "The Power to Be Affected," *International Journal of Politics, Culture & Society* 28, no. 3 (September 2015): 215–222; Gilles Deleuze, "Sur Spinoza: L'affect et l'idée," last modified 1978, accessed January 19, 2019, http://www.cip-idf.org/article.php3?id_article=5631; Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Philosophie pratique*, Nouv. éd. (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2003); Kwek, "Power and the Multitude."

[41] Kwek, "Power and the Multitude."

[42] Sharp, "Why Spinoza Today?"

[43] Ericka Tucker, "Hope, Hate and Indignation: Spinoza and Political Emotion in the Trump Era," in *Trump and Political Philosophy: Patriotism, Cosmopolitanism, and Civic Virtue*, ed. Marc Benjamin Sable and Angel Jaramillo Torres (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 131–157.

Brian Massumi, one of the leading figures of affect studies, follows a similar logic when he analyzes the capitalist saturation of social space by fear. "Technologies of fear", he writes, carve "into the flesh habits, predispositions, and associated emotions—in particular, hatred—conducive to setting social boundaries, to erecting and preserving hierarchies, to the perpetuation of domination"[44]. Fear is described as " power mechanism for the perpetuation of domination"[45]. These examples, which could be multiplied, describe those experiencing fear – *again* – as powerless, passive, and vulnerable to manipulation. This kind of analysis reiterate the story of fear from the *point of view of the dominant*. One could argue that such studies just work with and through the different landscapes of affects as analytical tools to dismantle the logics and power mechanisms without normative judgement about the affects themselves. However, my claim is that in perpetually describing how frightened bodies slide into paralysis or racism, we reproduce the fatalistic tale of the fear-authoritarianism nexus and deprive ourselves of the tools essential for dealing with fear in political fruitful ways once it is there. The desire of thinkers on the left to criticize and analyze the subtle mechanisms by which fear is orchestrated by the dominants all too often leads to a neglect of how the dominated could act upon this fear. As a matter of fact, the answer of leftist movements to political fear has often been "we are not afraid" or "let's make the fear change sides."

Even though their take on fear specifically hasn't been substantially different in terms of described consequences,[46] the queer feminist strand of affect studies provides more nuanced conceptualizations of affected agencies – and as I argue, more useful to cope with disaster capitalism. Indeed, the rehabilitation of the role of so said "negative" feelings and affects for emancipatory politics has been at their heart. Sara Ahmed, notably, has provided a sharp critique of what she calls the "affirmative turn" of Deleuzian affect thinkers, arguing that their dichotomous thinking in terms of activity and passivity, as well as their insistence on "joy" as only good source of true rebellion could end up reinforcing the status quo.[47] As she writes, the "assumption that good feelings are open and bad feelings are closed allows historical forms of

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[44] Brian Massumi, *The Politics of Everyday Fear* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), viii.

[45] Ibid., ix.

[46] Ahmed, notably, has dedicated an entire chapter on racism and fear in "the cultural politics of emotions." Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Second edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014.

[47] For a wider critique of how a strand of affect studies favors certain kinds of repression of negativity and amnesia, see Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (1 September 2005): 548–67; Brigitte Bargetz and Sandrine Sanos, "Feminist Matters, Critique and the Future of the Political," *Feminist Theory* 21, no. 4 (1 December 2020): 501–16.

injustice to disappear."[48] She invokes the figure of the feminist killjoy, the unhappy queer, and the melancholic migrant to show how "suffer[ing] the loss of an idea of happiness through disappointment – can even spring you into action."[49] Accordingly, she invites us "to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them but to learn by how we are affected by what comes near, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as an ethical resource."[50] Revolutionary politics, she concludes "has to work hard to stay proximate to unhappiness."[51] Far from being isolated in her philosophical project, Ahmed can be situated within an entire tradition of queer and black feminists who have been thinking (affective) vulnerability and agency alongside of one another, exploring the ambivalence, and sometimes even the resourcefulness of anger (Audre Lorde), of shame (Probyn), of mourning (Judith Butler), of depression (Ann Cvetjovitch), of "feeling backward" (Heather Love) and other "ugly" feelings (Sianne Ngai).

However, it is notable that fear hasn't undergone such a rehabilitation, despite its contemporary ubiquity. In our catastrophic times, characterized by the spreading of powerlessness, I argue we ought to remind all these feminist invitations to think bad feelings, agency and emancipation together, and follow up this gesture in order to consider the critical potential of fear. In times where the capacity of critical theories to propose emancipatory concepts and tools is increasingly questioned, I argue that looking at the practices of past feminist activists could also be helpful.[52] They help us envision how the negative affects generated by our catastrophic times could morph into *something* else *than* a technology of authoritarian governmentality. The techniques of feminist consciousness-raising in the 1970s, and later women's mobilizations against the military arms race, are perfect examples of an emancipatory politics based on fear and other "sad passions."[53] Beyond essentializing visions of

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[48] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2010), 217.

[49] Ibid., 210.

[50] Ibid., 216.

[51] Ibid., 123.

[52] Against a conception of political theory showing the way to go to social mobilizations, I believe (with many others) that political theorists can learn a lot from activists.

[53] For an account of ecofeminist's transformative and life-affirming way of doing politics and an analysis of how anger, fear and joy fueled their protest, see the wonderful article from Benedikte Zitouni, "Planetary Destruction, Ecofeminists and Transformative Politics in the Early 1980s," *Interface: a journal for and about social movements* Volume 6 (2) (November 2014): 244–270.

sad passions, they enable us to envision an alternative story of what mourning, angry and frightened bodies can do.

Feeling as Knowing

Consciousness-raising groups were formed by Women's Liberation activists to discuss their everyday experiences of patriarchy. This moment is often recalled as a moment where the definition of what counts as public and political shifted – "the private is political," feminists affirmed. While discussing the pain and struggles of their daily lives, women attending these circles transformed issues that were considered "individual problems" into political ones.[54] Strikingly, the qualification of feelings as valid forms of knowledge, and as powerful components of social reality was key to their politics. As the West Redstockings collective wrote, "our politics begin with our feelings."[55] "We regard our personal experience, and our feelings about that experience, as the basis for an analysis of our common situation."[56]

This alternative epistemology was born out of a deep disapproval of the claims of objectivity and universality made by patriarchal knowledge forms.[57] Feminists promoted a method of inquiry that used feelings as a departing point for systemic political analysis. Given "the enormous pressure placed on us [women] everywhere to deny our own perceptions or feelings," the

first task is to develop our capacity to be aware of our feelings and to pinpoint the events or interactions to which they are valid responses. This method has taught us that we do not

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[54] Carol Hanish, "The Personal Is Political," last modified 1969, accessed August 11, 2020, http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html.

[55] San Francisco Redstockings, "Our Politics Begin with Our Feelings," 1970, Consciousness-Raising Papers, 1968-72, https://redstockings.org/index.php/main/consciousness-raising-papers-1968-72.

[56] New York Redstockings, "Redstockings Manifesto," 1969, Consciousness-Raising Papers, 1968-72, https://redstockings.org/index.php/rs-manifesto.

[57] Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 3 (April 1, 1982): 515–544.

oppress ourselves and that our pain is not the result of masochism, self-hate, or inferiority, but is a response to some behavior that was in fact designed to humiliate, hurt, and oppress us.[58]

These groups did not only operate a theoretical and epistemological rehabilitation of other ways of knowing, which has been written about in feminist epistemology scholarship. Feminists also offered a method, a new way of doing politics, in which small groups of women would turn their negative emotions, and notably their fears, into a source of political power and reflexivity. The transformation of pain into resistance; and the translation of what was labelled as individual feelings into an object of serious study and political work was at the root of these practices and laid the foundation of a new kind of political agency.

Ecofeminists such as Joanna Macy offered a similar method, which, however, focused more on ecological issues and the military arms race, which they theorized under the name of "despair and empowerment workshops." The starting point, and epistemological claim, resonates with what was advanced by the consciousness-raising groups: "Many of us, schooled in the separation of reason from feeling, discount our deepest responses to the condition of our world."[59] In short, during different phases of these workshops, members were first encouraged to acknowledge and express their feelings regarding the planetary crisis, then to realize ways in which pain could be connected with the pain of other entities or individuals; and were finally, encouraged to make plans for the future while identifying the resources and ties they could count on. Macy's practices are called at once "despair work" and "work that reconnects" as they claim that our pain for the world reveals our interconnectedness and can thus become a source of power. "Power, far from being identified with invulnerability, requires just the opposite – openness, vulnerability, and readiness to change."[60]

Affective Communities and Collective Agency

Of course, falling prey to the discourse of the liberating power of fear or negative affect by emphasizing *only* its potentialities would be a romantic theoretical move. Feeling the

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[58] Redstockings, "Redstockings Manifesto."

[59] Joanna R. Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society, 1983).

[60] Joanna Macy, "Working through environmental despair," in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, ed. Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995).

consequences of patriarchy or ecological collapse is not necessarily an easy thing, nor is it intrinsically empowering. However, looking at these examples allows us to move from an understanding of affect as an individual feature to the result of a specific political arrangement and trans-individual network. A move, in other words, from dichotomous thinking in terms of "sad" and "joyful" passions towards thinking in terms of *affective arrangements*: "Dynamic formations, comprising, for instance, people, things, artefacts, spaces, discourse, behaviors and expressions in a characteristic 'intensive' mode of composition [...] as part of which affect is patterned, channeled, and modulated in recurrent and repeatable ways."[61] What matters, then, is not the kind of affects or emotion people seem to feel, but the mediations and settings that channel and shape these affects. Hence the elaboration of affective arrangements within activist circles, the "climate fear taboo" can be broken,[62] legitimately expressing, transforming and restructuring fears and other negative emotions, offering a "knowledge about the causes" (advocated by Spinoza) of our affections. In spaces where negative affects are considered legitimate and valid political experiences, they lead to specific forms of awareness, interconnectedness, and collective agency. They open up new worlds and new ways of struggling.

In the 70s, many have been reluctant to consider these practices as political practices and have dismissed them as "therapy."[63] Indeed, naming personal emotions is insufficient and can easily be integrated into the current neoliberal and therapeutic culture, leading to the "psychologization" and "therapeutization" of social and political issues.[64] It is striking, however, that in both cases, the initiators of these methods explicitly opposed what they were doing to

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[61] Jan Slaby, Rainer Mühlhoff, and Philipp Wüschner, "Affective Arrangements," *Emotion Review* 11, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 3–12.

[62] Renee Lertzman, "Breaking the Climate Fear Taboo," *Sightline Institute*, March 12, 2014, accessed January 20, 2019, https://www.sightline.org/2014/03/12/breaking-the-climate-fear-taboo/.

[63] See Hanish, "The Personal Is Political" for an iconic answer to such critiques.

[64] Nicolas Marquis, "Les affinités électives du développement durable, du développement personnel et du libéralisme. Analyse des représentations de militants engagés dans des mouvements alternatifs," 2013; François Sicot, "La Psychologisation Rampante de La Question Sociale," in *La France Invisible*, ed. Stéphane Beaud (La découverte, 2006); Eva Illouz, *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

traditional therapy: "Consciousness-raising is not 'therapy,' which implies the existence of individual solutions and falsely assumes that the male-female relationship is purely personal."[65]

[Presenting our workshops as] just a matter of catharsis would suggest that, after owning and sharing our responses to mass suffering and danger, we could walk away purged of pain for our world. But that is neither possible nor adequate to our needs.[66]

While the wellbeing of participants was evidently at stake in these practices, their goal was never personal healing in an unjust system: they were initiated to lead and sustain commitments, rallies, and actions towards systemic change. As radical feminist Kathie Sarachild wrote, "Our feelings will lead to our theory, our theory to our action, our feelings about that action to new theory and then to new action.[67] The two Women's Pentagon Actions against militarism in 1980 and 1981 gathered thousands of women and reflected this new way of linking personal experiences and emotions with collective action: "We are gathering at the Pentagon on November 17 because we fear for our lives. We fear for the life of this planet, our Earth, and the life of our children who are our human future."[68] During these gatherings, protestors went through multiple stages, called "mourning," "rage," "empowerment" and "defiance," going from rituals, weaving and blockades. Fear was acknowledged and considered as a starting point for political action. Sad passions, and emotions were not only considered as epistemologically valuable, but they also became components of a new way of doing politics, beyond the "standing and declaring" of conventional gatherings.[69]

Many were able to grieve in ways that have never been done before in a political demonstration. Usually when you're in a space like that it's really hard to let go with whatever

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[65] Redstockings, "Redstockings Manifesto."

[66] Macy, "Working through environmental despair."

[67] Kathie Sarachild, "A Program for Feminist Consciousness Raising," in *Notes from the Second Year : Women's Liberation, Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*, ed. Shulamith; Anne Koedt; Radical Feminism Firestone, First Edition. (Radical Feminism, 1970).

[68] Collective, "Unity Statement of the Women's Pentagon Action," last modified 1980, accessed May 17, 2021, http://www.wloe.org/WLOE-en/background/wpastatem.html.

[69] Rhoda Linton and Michele Whitham, "With Mourning, Rage, Empowerment and Defiance : The 1981 Women's Pentagon Action," in *Exposing Nuclear Phallacies*, ed. Diana E. H Russell (New York: Pergamon Press, 1989), 164.

you're feeling [...] we made a space to deal with those needs usually filled only by close friends and too often, outside their political context.[70]

Besides their instrumental use for politics, these workshops and gatherings can be conceived as micropolitical interventions towards embedded, affected, caring and still empowered subjectivities. A consciousness-raising participant recalls: "That night I began to realize that I needed and wanted to be part of something larger and stronger than myself."[71] That is all the more true for the despair and empowerment sessions, in which one is invited to recognize pain and grief for other entities, which is just the illustration of our interconnection with them. Indeed, Macy writes that we reach "a new level of social consciousness" when we recognize the larger web within which we act.[72] "Anger is anger on behalf of others as well as ourselves. We find a guilt that is not personal blame, but a kind of collective culpability, as a society and even a species."[73]

As participants "encounter dimensions of feeling that extend far beyond the personal ego with its separate needs and wants,"[74] their self–perception changes. Consciousness-raising groups, and despair and empowerment groups produced collective agency.

More research needs to be done concerning the spaces, practices, and emotional stances necessary to, on the one hand, sustain resistance and, on the other hand, extend our perception capacities. Affective arrangements like the ones I described can offer a partial answer to the crisis we find ourselves in, increasing our awareness of our embeddedness in the web of life. They show that social movements do not only emotionally "react" to events, or instrumentalize others' emotions, but can effectively reflect, experience and use their own affections for emancipatory politics. Contemporary feminist scholars, activists and collectives have actively continued this tradition, be it in the Chicago "Feel Tank"[75] (and their famous parades of the politically depressed) or by theorizing the key role of affective dissonances for feminist

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[70] Diana E. H. Russell, Annie Popkin, and Delgado Garry, "Mobilizing Emotions: Organizing the Women's Pentagon Action: Interview with Donna Warnock," in *Exposing Nuclear Phallacies* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1989), 194.

[71] Kristy Royall, "What Is Consciousness Raising?," *Florida Now Conference Workshop Packet: Consciousness raising for organizing*, Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives for Action (1996): 17–20.

[72] Macy, "Working through environmental despair."

[73] Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age*.

[74] Ibid.

[75] "Who We Are," *Feeltankchicago*, accessed 16 July 2019, http://feeltankchicago.net/about.

reflexivity and solidarity.[76] Interestingly, in recent climate activism, XR has been using tools very reminiscent of the feminist techniques I just described, be it in their emotional debrief sessions, or in their climate grief sessions, using a quite unusual approach for mobilizing inertia, fear and despair as drivers of change.[77]

CONCLUDING REMARKS : TAKING FEAR SERIOUSLY

I have shown that in an era where feelings of fear, hopelessness and powerlessness spread, providing fertile ground for reactionary politics, we must pay more attention to the micropolitical, affective implications of our catastrophic times. Against the frameworks offered by hegemonic approaches in political theory (sad passions and fear as paralyzing devices), I have argued that recognizing the ambivalence of fear and other sad passions in political movements is an important step towards a better understanding of political agency in the age of climate chaos. In 2014, the Institute for Precarious Consciousness, a militant research collective based in the UK, called for "new tactics and theories to combat anxiety"[78] . Drawing on consciousness raising, they called for local forums, where people would share, depersonalize, depathologize, and repoliticize their anxieties. Inheriting from feminist practices and writings allows us to take fear seriously, and to conceive of affected and frightened politics in a very different, and more promising way, than traditional accounts in political theory. The examples I used invite us to question the emancipatory nature of given *affective arrangements*, instead of holding to the "sad passions" versus "joyful passions" dichotomy. They trace an emancipatory path for affects usually considered debilitating and easy to manipulate.

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[76] Clare Hemmings, "Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation," *Feminist Theory* 13, no. 2 (1 August 2012): 147–61.

[77] For more information on XR's regenerative culture, and their take on negative emotions, see Emily Westwell and Josh Bunting, "The Regenerative Culture of Extinction Rebellion: Self-Care, People Care, Planet Care," *Environmental Politics* 29, no. 3 (15 April 2020): 546–51.

[78] Institute for Precarious Consciousness, 'We Are All Very Anxious : Six Theses on Anxiety & the Prevention of Militancy', *We Are Plan C* (blog), 2014, https://www.weareplanc.org/blog/we-are-all-very-anxious/.

The lesson to be drawn from the current crisis, is that the relation between *knowing* and *acting* is not a linear one,[79] and that ethical principles can't be reduced to a set of theoretical doctrines. As Félix Guattari wrote in 1989, "if the greening is to develop beyond the superficial level allowed by the consumeristic selves manufactured by the various micropowers maintaining integrated world capitalism, new modules of subjectification must be created."[80] Yet, it is not exactly clear what these "new modes of subjectification" would exactly encompass. As Jane Bennett puts it: "the bodily disciplines through which ethical sensibilities and social relations are formed and reformed are themselves politics and constitute a whole (underexplored) field of micropolitics without which any principle or policy risks being just a bunch of words."[81]

We get closer to the underanalyzed field of micropolitics, when we look at the practices I mentioned. We can only agree with Stephanie Erev, when she writes that "micropolitical interventions are not sufficient on their own": they will stop neither the fossil fuel industry nor climate denialists. However, they contribute to a larger assemblage of tactics for transformation notably because they efficiently counter "the tendency to understand and experience ourselves as self-contained and closed off from one another and the world we share in common."[82] As such, they constitute a partial answer to the loss of agency constitutive of our era.

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[79] Symptomatically, the "information deficit hypothesis"—namely, the once wide held belief among politics and scientists that more data and reports about the dangers associated to climate change must be spread, to inform people, so they act—has never been so implausible. There is growing consensus about the fact that more information won't make a difference on people's will and capacity to engage politically. Paul M. Kellstedt, Sammy Zahran, and Arnold Vedlitz, "Personal Efficacy, the Information Environment, and Attitudes toward Global Warming and Climate Change in the United States," *Risk analysis: An official publication of the society for risk analysis* 28, no. 1 (February 2008): 113–126; Jon A. Krosnick et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Democratic Citizens' Policy Agendas: A Study of Popular Concern about Global Warming," *Climatic Change* 77, no. 1–2 (July 1, 2006): 7–43; Brianne Suldovsky, "The Information Deficit Model and Climate Change Communication," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Climate Science* (September 26, 2017), accessed April 7, 2018, http://climatescience.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228620.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228620-e-301. In Jean-Pierre Dupuy's words, most of us *know* a catastrophe is coming; we just don't *believe* it (Dupuy 2004, 142).

[80] Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (Continuum, 2000).

[81] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[82] Stephanie Erev, "Feeling the Vibrations: On the Micropolitics of Climate Change," *Political Theory* 47, no. 6 (December 1, 2019): 836–863.

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