Received: 18 July, 2025
Accepted: 6 October, 2025
Published: 1 June, 2026

The Political Is Affective

Marie Wuth – Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany, Marie.wuth@ku.de
Orcid: https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2375-731X

Abstract

This paper develops a feminist affect-theoretical account of the relation between the affective and the political, advancing the double claim that the political is affective and the affective is political. Drawing on Baruch de Spinoza's relational ontology of power, I argue that the affective and the political are not merely intertwined but fundamentally co-constitutive: both are expressions of power, and neither can be adequately understood in isolation from the other. The paper proceeds in two parts. The first part elaborates a Spinozist framework in which affects are understood as relations of power that constitute the very fabric of political life, illustrated through the cases of incel communities and climate activism. The second part engages critically with feminist contributions to the public/private debate, particularly Susan Moller Okin's analysis of the structural flaws underpinning this dichotomy, in order to show how an affect-theoretical perspective both extends and radicalises these insights. Deliberately echoing the feminist maxim that the personal is political, this paper radicalises that insight by shifting the focus from the politicisation of a separate private sphere to the inherently political nature of affective relations themselves. By substituting the affective for the private in Okin's critique, I demonstrate that the categorisation of affect is itself a political process, and that its historical marginalisation has functioned as a strategic instrument of patriarchal and colonial power. The paper concludes by arguing that attending to the ambivalence of affect — its capacity to entrench domination as well as incite transformation — opens pathways toward a more intersectional and emancipatory political theory.

Keywords: affect theory, feminist political theory, Spinoza, Okin, public/private dichotomy, power

1. Affects and Politics: A Two-Way Street

"*Sine ira et studio*"—without either bitterness or partiality—expresses Tacitus's (2012, 1,1) ideal of jurisprudence and state politics. This phrase articulates an image of politics that has long shaped thought and action, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, and which continues to inform our understanding of politics, as well as its ideals and norms. This model of politics is one devoid of passion, impulse, or partiality. Politics, considered as the quintessential human activity, is the domain of reason, where rational decisions prevail. In other words, politics and emotion, or affect, have long been seen as antithetical.

This staged opposition forms part of a series of dualisms and dichotomies that have characterised and guided the canon of Western political theory, among them the contrasts between culture and nature, mind and body, and reason and emotion. From this angle, we can highlight a significant link between the problem of separating

politics and affect, and feminist philosophy: within this series of dualisms, everything on the right—nature, body, emotion—perpetually succumbs to what stands on the left—culture, mind, and reason (Lloyd 1984, 3). Importantly, throughout the history of Western thought, femininity has been associated with the right, subordinated side, with nature, body, and emotion; a connection that has ultimately been used to legitimise the exclusion of women from the realm of reason, mind, and, of course, politics (Lloyd 1984; Spelman 1988; Jaggar 1996). The exclusion or ignorance of the significance and function of affects in politics can thus be understood as an expression of patriarchal oppression and heteronormative structures. These structures were never exclusive to philosophical discourse, but have shaped societal life in their capacity as foundations of legitimacy and models of political institutions and structures.

In the past two decades, the intricate entanglement of affect and politics has been subject to renewed scrutiny, both within academic discourse—most notably through what has come to be termed the "Affective Turn" at the dawn of the twenty-first century—and beyond the confines of scholarly debate (see e.g. Massumi 2002; Connolly 2002; Clough 2007; Wetherell 2013). Public discourse, too, has increasingly grappled with the role of affect in shaping political life and collective imaginaries. This heightened attentiveness, however, is not incidental; it has been catalysed by profound transformations within the political landscape itself. The ascendance of populist movements across the ideological spectrum, the resurgence of nationalism, and the intensifying mobilisation and polarisation of social movements and political actors collectively testify to the constitutive role of affect in contemporary politics (Slaby and von Scheve 2019).

To be sure, neither populism nor nationalist agitation are novel phenomena. Yet their amplified visibility and resonance in recent years have sharpened recognition of affect's double-edged function in democratic life. On the one hand, affective energies possess a vital democratic potential—they can galvanise political participation, foster solidarity, and animate movements for justice. On the other hand, the very intensity that renders affects politically generative also renders them susceptible to manipulation, instrumentalisation, and co-optation by reactionary forces. In particular, the strategic mobilisation of emotions—whether fear, resentment, or even hope—can deepen societal fissures, fuel antagonisms, and erode the preconditions for democratic deliberation. Thus, while the presence of affect in politics is not in itself pathological, the way in which it is harnessed—whether to empower or to exclude—remains a critical question for any serious political analysis.

The inherent ambivalence of affect becomes particularly salient when we examine how affects—and those who express them—are judged within political and public life. As theorists such as Sara Ahmed (2014) and Lauren Berlant (2011) have incisively shown, affects are not simply private or spontaneous responses; they are deeply entangled with cultural scripts that encode certain emotions as either "strong" or "weak," in ways that are both gendered and hierarchical. Emotions such as compassion or care are frequently feminised and devalued, regarded as signs of fragility or irrationality, whereas affects like courage, especially in their assertive forms, are coded as masculine, and thus valorised as markers of political strength or leadership.

This dynamic is not limited to abstract discourses on affect; it manifests acutely in the differential treatment of emotional expression among political actors. The meaning and legitimacy of affective displays are often contingent on an agent's positionality—shaped by gender, race, class, and other intersecting social markers. In some cases, affective expression in politics is celebrated as a sign of authenticity, empathy, and accessibility, seemingly bridging the divide between representatives and the represented. In others, it is castigated as manipulative, inappropriate, or even undemocratic—especially when expressed by those who are already marginalised or subjected to gendered forms of scrutiny. Consider, for example, the divergent receptions of

emotional expression in U.S. political culture. The former U.S. president Joe Biden has frequently been lauded for his emotional openness, particularly in moments where he has spoken about personal loss and grief; his affective register is read as humanising, as a source of moral credibility and connection. By contrast, during her 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton's emotional expressions were often met with suspicion and derision. Her displays of affect were cast as strategic, insincere, or as signs of emotional instability—traits allegedly incompatible with leadership. Such starkly different receptions reveal how patriarchal norms continue to govern affective legibility in politics. Masculinised forms of emotional expression—particularly those framed as rational, contained, or empathetically paternal—are endorsed, while feminised affects remain suspect, coded as either excessive or deficient.

Thus, affective dynamics in the political sphere can function as diagnostic tools, revealing the sedimented structures of power that continue to underwrite notions of political legitimacy. The asymmetrical valuation of emotional expression underscores how appeals to neutrality or rationality often serve to obscure ongoing exclusions and inequalities. In this sense, the management of affect within political discourse is far from incidental; it reflects the contested terrain of democratic inclusion itself.

Moreover, affects tend to erupt most visibly—and gain particular traction—at moments of political rupture, when the stability of the political order is threatened or conventional forms of governance prove inadequate. It is precisely in such moments of crisis—during electoral upheavals, in the wake of state failures, or amid pervasive climates of insecurity—that emotions are explicitly mobilised, both by political actors and by publics themselves. These boundary situations lay bare the dual role of affect: they reveal both its disruptive potential and its instrumentalisation within political strategies of control or mobilisation. The sudden centrality of emotions in such moments is not an aberration. Rather, it points to the fact that affect constitutes a latent but constant undercurrent in political life—one that surfaces with particular intensity whenever the limits of established political orders are reached or transgressed.

Despite the increasing theoretical and public attention to the political force of affect, a deep ambivalence persists regarding its status within democratic life. Affects are often acknowledged as politically consequential, yet they continue to be treated with suspicion—as volatile, disruptive, or secondary to the ostensibly more stable terrain of rational deliberation. This residual distrust signals not only a persistent attachment to outdated dichotomies between reason and emotion, but also an unwillingness to confront the extent to which affect is not merely present in politics, but constitutive of it. Any attempt to sideline affect thus risks reproducing the very exclusions it purports to overcome, obscuring the complex affective economies that underlie contemporary political struggles.

Against this background, a feminist engagement with the relation between affects and politics proves both timely and necessary. As feminist theorists have long emphasised, judgments about the democratic or antidemocratic character of affects are neither neutral nor universal. Rather, they are shaped by power relations and the positionality of the individuals involved. A deeper analysis of the affect–politics nexus can thus reveal how seemingly neutral political norms reproduce unequal and unjust structures of domination—along the axes of gender, race, and class. This is especially relevant for feminist critique, given that the historical exclusion of emotions from the political sphere has been intertwined with the exclusion of women and other marginalised groups from political participation. In this light, rethinking—and ultimately overcoming—the separation of affect and politics is not merely a theoretical project; it also opens pathways toward more emancipatory forms of political practice and a more inclusive understanding of democratic agency.

My aim in this paper is to develop such a feminist account of the relation between affects and politics by advancing the double claim that the affective is political and the political is affective. In itself, this assertion is not novel. A wide range of affect theorists have articulated comparable claims—some diagnosing an emergent "affective regime" of governance, others showing how affects pervade political institutions, social movements, and forms of collective identification (Connolly 2002; Protevi 2009; Nussbaum 2013; Lordon 2016; Bargetz and Sauer 2015; Slaby and Bens 2019). Yet my approach differs in one crucial respect: I emphasise the co-constitutive and ultimately inseparable relation between affect and politics. My central argument is grounded in a relational understanding of power and the claim that both affect and politics are not simply influenced by power, but are themselves expressions of power. This insight is elaborated through a critical engagement with the political philosophy of Baruch de Spinoza (1985; 2016), who foregrounded the role of affect in the dynamics of political life. Within feminist Spinoza scholarship, affect and embodiment have been treated as central to political analysis, a line of thought to which the present argument contributes (see e.g. Gatens and Lloyd 1999; James et al. 2000; Gatens 2009; Sharp 2011).

An affect-theoretical approach to the political, then, does not simply add a feminist perspective to existing political theory; it also opens a more radical horizon for democratic thought. By insisting that the affective and the political are fundamentally entwined, this approach challenges the presumption that politics can be reduced to rational deliberation or procedural neutrality. Instead, it understands politics as an inherently ambivalent field of conflict and consent, shaped by competing affects and power struggles. Such a perspective necessarily contests core tenets of liberal thought such as the figure of the hyper-masculine, autonomous political subject, or the presumed separation between private and public life, between reason and emotion, between body and mind. These dualisms have long been problematised within feminist theory—including in liberal feminist critiques such as those of Susan Moller Okin (1989). However, I seek to push this critique further by arguing that the political is affective at its very core, a claim that unsettles the boundary between the personal and the political, the private and the public. In this regard, my proposal aligns with key insights from radical feminist traditions.

The paper proceeds in two parts. In the first part, I introduce central insights from Spinoza's philosophy to illuminate the entanglement of affect, politics, and power. I demonstrate how an affect-theoretical account, and especially the concept of affective disposition, enables a deeper understanding of political phenomena, including processes of association, dissociation, inclusion, and exclusion. In the second part of the paper, I extend this framework to advance my double claim: that the political is affective and the affective is political. Here, I critically engage with liberal feminist perspectives, including Okin's, in order to show that an affect-theoretical account moves beyond their limitations. In doing so, I challenge binary conceptions of political subjectivity and political space, especially those that sustain the division between private and public, mind and body, or reason and affect. Ultimately, I argue that by attending to the ways we feel power and the ways power is exercised through affective relations, we can develop more immanent and transformative critiques of existing political structures and interactions.

2. Relations of Power

My claim that the affective is political and the political is affective rests upon the assumption that affects and politics are interlinked because they are expressions of power. More specifically, I understand affects as relations of power and politics as the organization of co-existence via the governance of power relations. This

understanding follows Spinoza, whose philosophy of immanence revolves around the notion of power (Saar 2013). Before explicating the different dimensions of power in which the interconnection of affects and politics plays out, it is helpful to briefly explain some of the notions at stake.

For Spinoza, everything there is, human and non-human beings, as well as material and immaterial things, is caused by the power of nature (1985, 425/EIp16dem), and every individual has a power for activity, a power of acting. Importantly, this power of acting is bound to the capacity to affect and be affected (493/E3post1). This two-sided ability depends on interaction and mutual affection with others and it is the very basis for the affects we experience. For Spinoza, affects are interactions which lead to a decrease or increase in the individual's power of acting (493/EIIIdef3). Whenever something happens to us that increases our power, we feel joy or pleasure, and, vice versa, whenever something happens to us that decreases our power, we experience sadness or pain (500-501/ EIIIp11s). Affects, therefore, are expressions of power and indicate a change in power through interaction. Since they always involve the presence of, and an encounter between, at least two beings, they are themselves relations, affective relations, power relations which pertain to situations and circumstances and elucidate the type of encounter and relation. Spinoza also reminds us that every individual exists only through and with others (555/ EIVp18d). No being persists in isolation; rather, each depends on relations of interaction and mutual influence to endure and to act.

Yet Spinoza's political realism prevents any romanticisation of this interdependence. While coexistence, interaction, and mutual presence are necessary conditions of life, they are not inherently stable or harmonious. Affects, for Spinoza, are intrinsically ambivalent (514, 526/EIIIp39s, EIIIp56); they fluctuate, vacillate, and may just as easily fragment as unify. Joy and sadness, love and hatred, hope and fear—all of these affects are unstable forces that bind and separate, enable and destroy. It is precisely this volatility of affects that makes political organisation necessary. Without some form of collective ordering through laws, norms, and institutional frameworks, social relations would remain precarious and fragile, subject to the unpredictable oscillations of the affects. Politics, therefore, emerges not as a secondary or derivative sphere, but as a necessary response to the affective condition of human existence.

This perspective makes clear that the relation between affects and politics is not unilateral, but reciprocal. Affects are the very fabric through which political life is woven; they connect individuals, forming the basis of community and shared life (Spinoza 2016, 532/ TPVI.I). Yet their ambivalence also means that they contain the seeds of discord, conflict, and disintegration. As much as affects can unite, they can also divide. Politics thus arises from the need to manage these affective forces; to regulate, stabilize, and channel them toward forms of coexistence that enable collective flourishing (566–68/ EIVp37s; James 2020).

From this vantage point, politics can be understood as the art of organising coexistence under conditions of affective ambivalence. It is a field of competing and converging affective forces—sometimes in conflict, sometimes in harmony, and often suspended in a state of tension. Politics, then, is not merely the realm of rational deliberation or institutional procedure; it is fundamentally shaped by the passionate regimes that govern bodies and communities (Balibar 1989; Sharp 2005). In this sense, politics and affects are mutually constitutive. Politics must attend to our affective constitution, accommodating the desires, fears, and hopes that animate the body politic. At the same time, politics actively shapes and modulates these very affects, moulding the affective contours of collective life and determining the forms of attachment, belonging, and exclusion that define political existence (Spinoza 1985; 2016; Butler 2015; James 2020).

Two examples help to further illustrate the inseparability of power, politics, and affects, and to illuminate how an affect-theoretical perspective can illuminate political phenomena.

One striking example is the case of so-called incel (involuntary celibate) communities. These online groups organise themselves around shared affects such as resentment, self-pity, envy, and misogynistic rage. Their collective identity is grounded in the narrative of exclusion from sexual and romantic relationships; an exclusion they reframe as systemic injustice against them as (mostly white) heterosexual men. However, what on the surface presents itself as a space for sharing personal suffering quickly reveals itself as a community structured around affective violence and patriarchal entitlement. Affective belonging within these spaces requires the constant reaffirmation of feelings of hatred toward women and contempt for more sexually successful men ("chads"), alongside the normalisation of self-hatred and nihilism (Nagle 2017). Those who question these narratives or express alternative affects, such as empathy, accountability, or feminist critique, are swiftly excluded, ridiculed, or harassed. This shows how affects here act as gatekeepers not only of community membership but also of epistemology: they enforce a worldview that frames gendered relations as inherently antagonistic and hierarchical, reducing women to objects of desire and competition, and naturalising male dominance and violence (Srinivasan 2021). Far from being mere personal feelings, these affects sustain a deeply political, patriarchal imaginary that legitimises both personal and structural misogyny. In this example, affects do not simply organise collective identity—they actively reproduce and escalate gendered hierarchies and violence, revealing the dangerous political work that affects can perform. This case also demonstrates how certain affective regimes can foreclose solidarity, empathy, and democratic dialogue, instead reinforcing authoritarian and exclusionary social imaginaries.

Another instructive case is found in global climate movements such as Fridays for Future, which are significantly driven by affects such as fear, anger, and hope. Many activists are motivated by a profound fear of environmental degradation and the looming, catastrophic consequences of climate change. At the same time, their hope for a sustainable and just future, and their anger at political inaction and corporate exploitation, forms an equally powerful driver for collective action. These shared affective experiences do not merely accompany their activism but are central to how these movements organise, mobilise, and sustain themselves (Ray 2020; Malm 2021). Here, too, we see that collective belonging is shaped by shared affective orientations: those who do not feel a comparable sense of urgency, or do not perceive climate change as a pressing threat, often struggle to relate to or engage with such movements. Access is not merely formal but conditioned by whether participants share certain affective investments and a particular outlook on the future. In this sense, environmental activism leverages affect both to forge internal cohesion and to build pressure against external political forces, responding to the broader socio-political context shaped by global power relations, economic interests, and ecological crises.

Both examples—reactionary communities like incel groups and progressive movements such as Fridays for Future—reveal how affects operate as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, forming the very conditions of political belonging. In both cases, affects act as affective "passports" or "tickets" to a given political space. Participation depends on shared emotional investments, and entrance may be denied on the basis of conflicting feelings or divergent self-understandings. These two cases also vividly illustrate how affects are not only expressions of individual experience but also modes of organising collective life. They show that affects function as political forces: they generate belonging, exclude dissent, authorise worldviews, and mobilise action. In short, they constitute a central medium through which political life is formed, maintained, and contested.

To grasp the deeper dynamics at play here, Spinoza's ontology proves to be helpful: as noted earlier, for Spinoza, every individual is characterised by a twofold capacity to affect and to be affected. Crucially, this capacity is not exercised in a vacuum. It is shaped by the past—by the sedimented history of affective encounters that condition what we perceive as joyful, painful, desirable, or threatening. These histories inform our present affective dispositions and guide our orientations toward the future (Spinoza 1985, 550/EIVp6; James 2003, 147). Yet our affective capacities and dispositions are equally shaped by the present: by our environments, by the people and institutions around us, and by dominant collective affects (Steinberg 2018). In this way, our affective dispositions are not just personal or psychological; they are deeply political.

Part of our affective disposition is also an inclination to imitate the affects of those around us (Spinoza 1985, 508/ EIIIp27)—whether it be shared enthusiasm at a protest or shared resentment in an online forum. This responsiveness to others is not a passive mimicry, but a constitutive part of how subjectivity and collectivity are formed. Affective resonance is a social and political mechanism: it facilitates alignment and polarisation, cohesion and division.

Importantly, this means that affective dispositions emerge not only from ontological necessity, but from social conditions—from material constraints, cultural narratives, and institutional structures that differentially distribute whose affects are heard, legitimised, or pathologised. From this vantage point, affective dispositions are socio-politically coded (Mühlhoff 2019; 2020). They are shaped by positionality within intersecting structures of domination—race, gender, class, sexuality, ability—and become habituated in collective repertoires of expression, suppression, and responsiveness. This coding can take the form of racialised or gendered emotional norms that govern which affects can be expressed, by whom, and in what contexts. Intersectionality, in this sense, is not only a framework for analysing overlapping oppressions, but also an affective concept. It reveals how power structures inscribe themselves in bodies and subjectivities, shaping what can be felt, expressed, or imagined. As Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989; 1991) and others have argued, intersectional marginalisation is not simply a matter of legal or economic exclusion; it is affectively lived. Affective dispositions are therefore both products and instruments of political and intersecting structures.

This perspective provides a powerful analytic for understanding political subjectivity. It allows us to see that the formation of political agents is not primarily a matter of ideology or rational deliberation, but of affective investment, resonance, and attunement (Massumi 2002; Connolly 2002). It shows how certain political imaginaries become possible—or impossible—through the distribution and regulation of affect. It also explains how individuals come to identify with particular causes, communities, or movements: not only because they think something is right or wrong, but because they are moved by it. An affect-theoretical perspective, grounded in a Spinozist ontology of power, reveals how the political is affective at every level: in how subjectivities are formed, in how communities are constituted, and in how structures of domination and resistance are lived and reproduced. It allows us to trace the micropolitics of power through the felt experiences of individuals and collectives, and to understand how the struggle over affects is a struggle over political life itself.

What emerges from the analysis so far is that such affective dynamics are not incidental; they constitute the very texture of the political itself. Affects shape political subjectivities, collective imaginaries, and social alliances, making them fundamental to how political spaces are structured and contested (Gatens and Lloyd 1999; Ahmed 2014). In this sense, the political is affective and, conversely, the affective is political. This understanding is also indebted to, and remains firmly situated within, feminist critique. This formulation

deliberately echoes the now-canonical feminist maxim that "the personal is political." The foundational claim that the personal is political exposed how the intimate, the emotional, and the domestic are not apolitical zones, but sites where power is exercised and reproduced. The proposition that the affective is political seeks to radicalise this insight: it shifts the focus from the politicisation of a supposedly separate private sphere to the inherently political nature of affective relations themselves; relations that move across bodies, institutions, and collective life. In this way, an affect-theoretical approach deepens feminist commitments by foregrounding the ambivalent, relational, and structural role of affect in shaping political subjectivities, imaginaries, and alliances. To make this argument more concrete, I now turn to key feminist contributions around the slogan "The personal is political," before showing how an approach based on affects can not only push this insight forward but also open up an intersectional perspective on the entanglement of power, embodiment, and affect in political life.

3. From the Personal to the Affective

"The personal is political": this rallying cry emerged from the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, gaining theoretical force in the 1980s as a trenchant critique of the ideological division between the public and the private, the political and the domestic. This slogan was defended by feminists from diverse theoretical and political backgrounds, ranging from radical feminists such as Carol Hanisch (1970), Shulamith Firestone (1970), and Catharine MacKinnon (1989), to liberal theorists like Susan Moller Okin (1989). While their strategies diverged, they converged on a shared insight: ostensibly "private" matters—such as reproduction, sexuality, and household labour—are, in fact, sites of political struggle, structured by legal frameworks, economic systems, and deeply embedded cultural norms. The central claim was clear: gendered oppression is not an unfortunate accident of the private sphere, but an effect of structural, institutionalised power relations.

Radical feminists in particular exposed how patriarchal domination operates both overtly and insidiously within the intimate domain, rendering violence, coercion, and inequality invisible under the guise of personal choice or familial tradition. Thinkers like Shulamith Firestone (1970), Catharine MacKinnon (1989), and Andrea Dworkin (1981) exposed the ways in which patriarchy operates not only through explicit laws and policies, but through deeply ingrained affective and material relations, especially within the family, sexuality, and the body. Firestone (1970) radically reconceptualised gender oppression as rooted in the biological family structure itself, arguing that reproductive labour and the material realities of childbirth and caregiving constitute a primary site of women's subjugation. This structural critique implicates affective relations such as love, dependency, and desire, revealing them as entangled with domination, rather than separate from it. MacKinnon (1989) analysed sexual politics as a fundamental dimension of power, where affective experiences like sexual violence, desire, and humiliation are not merely private matters, but constitutive of systemic gender hierarchies and unequal power relations. These dynamics shape subjectivities and political agency, complicating any simplistic bifurcation between public and private spheres.

While radical feminists urge us to dismantle and shatter the foundational structures of gendered domination in patriarchy, liberal feminists insist on legal reform, policy adjustment and foreground rights, recognition, and redistribution. Susan Moller Okin's (1989) critique remains foundational in liberal feminist thought, as she meticulously exposed how the rigid public/private divide perpetuates systemic gender inequalities by obscuring domestic violence, entrenching gendered labour divisions, and shaping legal regimes around marriage and divorce. Alongside Okin, liberal feminists such as Martha Nussbaum (2000) and Elizabeth

Anderson (2010) have also emphasised the role of the state in rectifying inequalities by ensuring equal access to political and economic opportunities. Nussbaum's (2000) capabilities approach highlights how the political must encompass the conditions enabling individuals, particularly women, to flourish beyond formal legal equality, including in intimate and affective realms. Anderson (2010) further stressed the importance of recognising social interdependencies and the relational nature of justice, thereby challenging atomistic conceptions of the political that overlook the embeddedness of individuals within networks of care.

Yet, while this feminist critique of the domestic/public split uncovered a panoply of gendered injustices, it did not go unchallenged from within feminist thought itself. In particular, Black feminists and other feminists of colour raised compelling objections, demonstrating that slogans like "The personal is political" often reflected a narrow and racially specific experience; one largely shaped by the positionality of white, middle-class women. Writers such as Audre Lorde (1984), bell hooks (1981), Angela Davis (1981), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argued that this formulation universalised particular forms of oppression while erasing the intersectional entanglements of race, class, and sexuality. Indeed, many of the "private" issues foregrounded in mainstream feminist discourse, such as housework or marital inequality, did not capture the lived realities of women whose struggles were inseparable from racialised exploitation, economic marginalisation, and state violence.

To ignore these intersecting forms of oppression is not simply to overlook nuance; it is to reproduce forms of epistemic violence. Any serious feminist agenda today must therefore remain attentive to these multiple axes of subordination, and it is precisely here that the reformulation the political is affective bears transformative potential. This perspective does not merely extend the feminist critique of the public/private divide; it reconfigures it by foregrounding affect as a critical site where power, vulnerability, and resistance coalesce—across and within differences.

To clarify the feminist critique developed here, I begin by revisiting Okin's incisive analysis of the four structural flaws underpinning the public/private dichotomy. Although grounded in a liberal feminist framework, Okin's critique serves as a conceptual springboard for examining how power operates through affective relations across domains conventionally coded as private or public. In doing so, I aim to show not only that the personal is political, but that the affective itself is inescapably political, and that attempts to cordon off affect from politics are conceptually untenable and politically consequential.

3.1 Dynamics of Power in Affective Lives

The first flaw Okin identifies in the separation of personal, domestic life and public, political life is that "what happens in domestic and personal life is not immune from the dynamic of power, which has typically been seen as the distinguishing feature of the political" (1989, 128).

Okin demonstrates that political decisions profoundly shape the private sphere, as is evident in cases where legal systems fail to intervene in domestic violence, thereby treating bodily harm within families as a non-political matter. This relegation of violence, particularly gender-based violence, to the private realm does not constitute a withdrawal of power, but an active political decision to ignore certain forms of domination. In this way, the non-intervention of the state sustains gendered structures of power both within and beyond the domestic sphere, simultaneously rendering certain bodies vulnerable in public life. The public/private distinction thereby functions as a mechanism of selective political recognition and protection (128–29).

While some aspects of Okin's analysis have been addressed in contemporary political discourse, the underlying logic persists: the designation of what counts as political, what is recognised as the proper object of law, rights, and public concern, continues to structure and shape the dynamics of everyday life, both within and beyond the so-called private sphere.

This critique can be deepened by extending it to the affective domain. In parallel to Okin's argument, it becomes clear that affective life is not immune from the dynamics of power. The earlier discussion has shown that affectivity cannot be disentangled from power; affective relations are always already relations of power. The capacity to affect and to be affected forms the very basis of social relations and, by extension, of political organisation. Power is not something external to affective life; it is immanent to it. Such a reframing allows for a significant departure from Okin's heteronormative and binary focus on the nuclear family. By centring affective relations beyond intimate or familial ones, this analysis encompasses a broader array of social encounters, including those beyond normative frameworks of kinship or partnership, through which vulnerability, attachment, and legitimacy are structured and contested, for instance through socially sedimented affective dispositions that distribute exposure to harm, authority, and recognition. Importantly, it shifts the focus from fixed social roles toward the lived, relational experience of power—toward the ways in which affects are mobilised, regulated, and distributed in various spaces and under varying social conditions.

This perspective foregrounds the affective dimension of political life, highlighting how political organisation is inseparable from the regulation and modulation of affect. The dynamics of vulnerability, attachment, fear, solidarity, and desire are not merely personal or psychological; they are deeply political: shaping and shaped by structures of domination and resistance. In this way, the affective critique expands Okin's initial insight: not only is the personal political, but the affective is irreducibly political, both as a site of power and as a condition of political possibility.

3.2 Borders and Dichotomies Are Based on Political Decisions

The second structural flaw identified by Okin concerns the fact that even the very separation between private and political spheres presupposes a political decision. Any act of demarcation, of designating which matters fall under the domain of politics and which remain confined to the private, constitutes a political process. The boundary between private and public life is not a natural or self-evident distinction, but rather a product of political judgements about what counts as a legitimate object of public concern and regulation. Hence, the supposed separation between the political and the private is inherently paradoxical. Political intervention must first draw the line that ostensibly shields the private from politics. No sphere, then, can claim to be pre-political or untouched by political dynamics (129–31).

This argument becomes even more incisive when extended to the affective domain. If one substitutes the affective for the private in this critique, it follows that what is categorised as affective—whether fear, hope, love, or anger—is never simply given or natural. Instead, it emerges through political processes that establish which emotions, attachments, and responses are considered legitimate, intelligible, or politically significant. In this sense, the affective is not a realm apart from politics, but is always already politically mediated. The very act of distinguishing between "affective" and "political" domains is itself a political act—one that organises relations of power governing coexistence and legitimacy, and thereby shapes whose affects matter and under what conditions. Moreover, if the separation is in itself a political process, then this would imply that the political would constitute itself through its very demarcation from the affective– meaning the two realms would always be co-constitutive rather than truly separate. Thus, even if there was a demarcation of the political and the affective, this would demonstrate their interconnection much more than their separation.

Applied to the question of affect and politics, this leads to a crucial conclusion: the exclusion of affect from politics is itself a profoundly political manoeuvre. This observation also makes visible the longstanding parallel between the exclusion of affects and the exclusion of women from political life, both justified historically through appeals to emotionality and irrationality. Feminist analyses of the gendered and racialised politics of anger have long shown how such appeals operate to disqualify certain affects, and the subjects associated with them, from political legitimacy (Lorde 1984; Jaggar 1996). The marginalisation of affect thus appears not as a neutral or technical distinction, but as a strategic instrument of power, one that both enforces and conceals existing relations of domination. What is often dismissed as merely emotional or personal is, in fact, a site of political struggle.

3.3 Becoming Political Agents

The third reason why it is untenable to uphold a clear dichotomy between a supposedly non-political private sphere and a political public sphere, as Okin points out, is that domestic life is the primary site of socialisation. Okin focuses here on how we internalise and reproduce gender roles through private life, demonstrating how gendered socialisation shapes societal interactions (1989, 131–32).

However, an affective and intersectional feminist perspective radicalises this argument. Our socialisation does not merely occur through learning gender roles in the domestic realm; we become who we are through affective relations, which are themselves structured by power. Affective ties—our attachments, aversions, desires, and fears—are shaped within networks of domination and resistance that far exceed the boundaries of the nuclear family or heteronormative private life.

Crucially, approaching socialisation through the lens of affect allows us to decentre the family and the domestic as the sole or even primary sites of subject-formation. It highlights instead how processes of becoming—how we are formed and transformed as political subjects—are woven throughout broader social worlds, including institutions, media, labour, and community spaces. This perspective collapses the very distinction between public and private selves: we are always situated within affective economies that circulate through every domain of life.

Since affective relations are inseparable from power, processes of subject-formation must be understood as taking place within intersecting structures of oppression—those of gender, race, class, ability, age, and sexuality. Unlike Okin's relatively narrow focus on gendered socialisation within the family, an intersectional and affect-centred analysis recognises that these processes are not isolated or static. Instead, gender, race, class, and other social positions mutually constitute one another in the ongoing formation of political subjects.

In this view, there is no singular or finished "gendered self" to be attained through socialisation. Rather, the self is a shifting, unfinished constellation, marked by violence, desire, exclusion, solidarity, and resistance, reflecting both structural inequalities and collective struggles for freedom. The self emerges at the intersection of multiple, overlapping systems of power, and is continuously shaped through embodied and affective encounters. An affective and power-sensitive approach to the political thus understands subject-formation not as a closed process of learning fixed roles, but as an open-ended, contested terrain of becoming, where possibilities for resistance, rupture, and transformation are always present. This perspective makes clear that the affective is not simply entangled with the political; it is the very ground upon which political agency is forged.

3.4 Division of Labour

Okin's final critique addresses the psychological and material barriers created by the gendered division of labour between paid work and unpaid domestic work. She shows how assigning women to unpaid housework confines them to the private sphere, yet simultaneously deprives them of authority even within that space, precisely because their labour is neither socially nor economically recognised. This absence of recognition then reverberates in the public sphere, where women are underrepresented in positions of power and decision-making. In this way, Okin exposes the interconnection between public and private forms of authority and identity (132–33).

However, her focus on women's exclusion from paid labour has been widely critiqued for centring a white, middle-class perspective. Her analysis largely erases the long histories of women of colour, migrant women, and working-class women who have always been compelled to engage in paid labour; often in exploitative, racialised, and feminised sectors such as caregiving, domestic service, and reproductive labour. While these forms of labour sustain both private households and capitalist economies, they remain systematically devalued and politically marginalised. Furthermore, women positioned at the intersections of race, class, and citizenship face compounded barriers to political representation and public recognition—barriers which Okin's analysis leaves unexamined.

Still, there is a crucial insight to recover and radicalise from Okin's argument: the inseparability of public and private selves. From an intersectional and affective perspective, this inseparability must also extend to our affective lives: to our dispositions, attachments, desires, and capacities for affect and vulnerability. We do not shed our histories of subjection, our affective wounds, or our embodied capacities, when we enter or exit specific spaces. The workplace, the street, the home, and political institutions are not separate affective worlds; they are deeply interwoven sites where power moves through and shapes bodies, feelings, and relations.

Recognising this, we can articulate a more radical claim: the affective is political, and the political is affective, not through mere overlap, but as a fundamental co-constitution. This does not mean that the affective and the political collapse into an undifferentiated domain; rather, they name analytically distinct but inseparable expressions and relations of power. Understood in this way, the framework allows us to grasp how structures of power—white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, ableism—are continuously inscribed in and through our affective lives. It foregrounds not only the continuity of domination across different realms of life, but also the possibility of collective transformation through politicised forms of feeling, solidarity, and resistance that refuse the privatisation of affect.

4. Conclusion

Seen through the lens of power, the inseparability of politics and affect brings into view the exclusionary logics that have historically sustained their separation. These logics are deeply entangled with patriarchal, racist, and capitalist formations of power, which have repeatedly relied on the devaluation of affect to delimit political legitimacy. Claims to a separation between politics and affect are therefore not merely conceptually mistaken but function as instruments of patriarchal and colonial control. This has long been evident in the historical devaluation of affect, precisely because of its associations with femininity, racialised bodies, and those relegated to the margins of "rational" political agency.

Against this background, the affective approach presented here insists that we should not only recognise but value affect's constitutive role in political life. Affects are not secondary to politics; they are the very conditions of how political subjects emerge, act, and relate. Drawing on Spinoza's philosophy, we can deepen this insight: for Spinoza, we are not isolated rational beings who control our passions from above, but always already affective bodies embedded within a network of relations, shaped by the powers of other bodies, and constantly being transformed by encounters. Our capacity to act is inseparable from our capacity to affect and be affected. Spinoza's radical relational ontology thus aligns with feminist affect theory in refusing the fantasy of the autonomous, self-possessed political subject. It reveals that political agency is always a matter of situated, embodied, and affective entanglement. From this perspective, politics is not a sphere that we enter into despite our affects, but something we participate in through our affects. It also highlights that affects are themselves shaped by structures of domination, such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism, and thus become sites of both subjugation and resistance.

An affective feminist approach challenges hyper-masculine and dualistic ideals of political subjectivity. It foregrounds relationality, mutual implication, vulnerability, and interdependence as central to political life. It insists that political subjects are always in the making—constituted through their affective relations and their social, economic, and historical positionalities.

Claiming that the political is affective is thus more than a theoretical shift; it is a political intervention that contests the very foundations of dominant political imaginaries. It dissolves false separations between public and private, mind and body, self and other, reason and emotion. It calls for a reorientation of political theory toward the materiality of affects, the sociality of bodies, and the embeddedness of all political agency within histories of violence, care, and resistance.

By embracing the central role of affects, we move toward a more expansive, intersectional, and emancipatory vision of politics; one that does not merely "include" affect, but instead recognises that politics always already unfolds through affective, relational, and embodied worlds. Crucially, this approach resists any romanticisation of affect—it insists on attending to affect's ambivalence: how affects can entrench domination as well as incite transformation. In doing so, it opens the possibility for a political theory grounded not in fantasies of mastery, but in shared vulnerability, collective struggle, and the ongoing effort to increase our capacity to act together.

5. References

Ahmed, S. 2014. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh University Press.

Anderson, E. 2010. The Imperative of Integration. Princeton University Press.

Balibar, É. 1989. "Spinoza, the Anti-Orwell: The Fear of the Masses." *Rethinking Marxism* 2 (3): 104–39.

Bargetz, B. and B. Sauer. 2015. "Der Affective Turn: Das Gefühlsdispositiv und die Trennung von Öffentlich und Privat." *Femina Politica* 24 (1): 93–102.

Berlant, L. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press.

Butler, J. 2015. *Senses of the Subject*. Fordham University Press

Clough, P. T. 2007. "Introduction." In *The Affective Turn*, edited by P. T. Clough, with J. Halley, 1–33. Duke University Press.

Collins, P. H. 1990. Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment. Routledge.

Connolly, W. E. 2002. *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*. University of Minnesota Press.

Crenshaw, K. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989 (1), 139–68.

———. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241–1300.
Davis, A. Y. 1981. Women, Race & Class. Random House.
Dworkin, A. 1981. Pornography: Men Possessing Women. Putnam.
Firestone, S. 1970. The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution. William Morrow.
Gatens, M., ed. 2009. *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
Gatens, M. and G. Lloyd. 1999. *Collective Imaginings. Spinoza, Past and Present*. Routledge.
Hanisch, C. 1970. "The Personal Is Political." In Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation, edited by S. Firestone and A. Koedt, 76–78. Radical Feminism.
hooks, b. 1981. Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism. South End Press.
Jaggar, A. M. 1996. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology." In *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, edited by A. Garry and M. Pearsall, 166–90. Routledge.
James, S. 2003. *Passion and Action. The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
———. 2020. *Spinoza on Learning to Live Together*. Oxford University Press.
James, S., G. Lloyd, and M. Gatens. 2000. "The Power of Spinoza: Feminist Conjunctions." *Hypatia* 15 (2): 40–58.
Lloyd, G. 1984. *The Man of Reason. Male and Female in Western Philosophy*. Methuen Publishing.
Lorde, A. 1984. Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches. Crossing Press.
Lordon, F. 2016. *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza and Marx on Desire*. London: Verso.
MacKinnon, C. A. 1989. *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. Harvard University Press.
Malm, A. 2021. How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire. Verso.
Massumi, B. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Duke University Press.
Mühlhoff, R. 2019. "Affective Disposition." In *Affective Societies*, edited by J. Slaby and C. von Scheve, 119–30. Routledge.
———. 2020. "Affective Disposition, or: Reading Spinoza With Foucault. Towards an Affect Theory of Subjectivation and Power." *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
Nagle, A. 2017. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*. Zero Books.
Nussbaum, M. C. 2000. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge University Press.
———. 2013. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. Harvard University Press.
Okin, S. M. 1989. *Justice, Gender, and the Family*. Basic Books.
Protevi, J. 2009. *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic*. University of Minnesota Press.
Ray, S. J. 2020. A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety: How to Keep Your Cool on a Warming Planet. University of California Press.
Saar, M. 2013. *Die Immanenz der Macht: Politische Theorie nach Spinoza*. Suhrkamp.
Sharp, H. 2005. "Why Spinoza Today? Or, 'A Strategy of Anti-Fear.'" *Rethinking Marxism* 17 (4): 591–608.
_____. 2011. *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*. University of Chicago Press.
Slaby, J. and C. von Scheve. 2019. "Introduction" In *Affective Societies*, edited by J. Slaby and C. von Scheve, 1–24. Routledge.
Slaby, J. and J. Bens. 2019. "Political Affect." In *Affective Societies*, edited by J. Slaby and C. von Scheve, 340–51.
Spelman, E. 1988. *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Beacon Press.
Spinoza, B. 1985. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 1. Edited and translated by E. Curley. Princeton University Press.
———. 2016. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, vol. 2. Edited and translated by E. Curley. Princeton University Press.
Srinivasan, A. 2021. The Right to Sex. Bloomsbury Publishing.
Steinberg, J. 2018. *Spinoza's Political Psychology. The Taming of Fortune and Fear*. Cambridge University Press.
Tacitus. 2012. *Annals*. Translated by C. Damon. Penguin Classics.
Whetherel, M. 2013. "Affect and Discourse—What's the Problem? From Affect as Excess to Affective/Discursive Practice." *Subjectivity* 6 (4): 349–68.