Book Review

Affective Formation of Publics. Places, Networks, and Media

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Affective Formation of Publics is one of the many outcomes of the Collaborative Research Center *Affective Societies* at Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, which was initiated by Birgit Rössler-Röttger, one of the editors of this volume. The book is the result of a lecture series on affective publics, organized by the Collaborative Research Center in Berlin. An interview with Zizi Papacharissi, who coined the term 'affective publics' in her 2014 book of the same name, opens the volume, followed by an introduction by the editors and 13 case studies that explore "the interplay of places, networks, and media in constituting publics" (p. 12). Coming from communication studies and social and cultural anthropology, respectively, Lünenborg and Rössler-Röttger point out the differences in how publics are approached and understood in these disciplines. In anthropology, the results of ethnographic studies in non-Western local life-worlds show that 'place matters' and that processes of opinion-forming and opinion-making depend on specific constellations and power relations (including aspects such as secrecy or concealment) that are not captured by Western concepts of the public sphere. In communication studies, however, Habermas' concept of the bourgeois public sphere with its key element of rational consensus led to normative, universalistic, and essentialist understandings of the public sphere that dominated for a long time. Only recently it has been criticized and supplemented by an understanding of a multiplicity of competing publics as performative, embodied, and conflictual arrangements. At the same time, with digital media and media-saturated societies (pp. 15-16), new perspectives on publics are emerging that make the interconnection of publics and emotions and affect (which has always been a key element in mobilizing people) more apparent.

The chapters are divided into three sections, the first of which focuses on affective publics associated with places such as museums, theaters, and governmental administration. In the case study of the Humboldt Forum in Berlin that displays 590 objects of Maasai origin from the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, Paola Ivanov, Laibor Kalanga Moko, and Jonas Bens conducted ethnographic fieldwork and collaborative workshops with Maasai communities in northern Tansania to get their perspectives on the objects on display. For the Maasai, some of these objects are not objects at all, but what they call *imasaa*, something that becomes part of the person to whom it belongs and would never be given away. An *imasaa* has its own agency as it affects individuals and collectives and is affected by the way it is treated, the appropriate way being with love and care. For the authors, concepts such as these point to the shortcomings of Eurocentric approaches in the current restitution debates.

Matthias Warstat argues for the concept of *theater publics*, which offers an "overarching idea of an audience that exceeds the reception of an individual performance" (p. 51) and explores the relations between theater and street publics and state authorities during the protests, demonstrations and political changes in East Berlin in the fall and winter of 1989-1990. Timm Sureau and Thomas Götzelmann understand the interactions between the state and (non-)citizens as *administrative publics*. The results of their long-term ethnographic fieldwork on the affective dynamics

of programming the online presence of the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees show how business logics and corporate sentiments become entangled in processes of efficient bureaucracy. The authors stress that "(d)igitilization changes the very nature of relations between state actors and individuals or nonstate actors" (p. 79) in ways that render users unaware of the technologies behind online tools, producing what Mühlhoff calls *incapacitation.*

Not surprisingly, the section on networks contains the most chapters, seven in all, reflecting fundamental questions about networks such as the temporality of affective networks, the strategies of activists in creating counter-publics, the potential of big data analyses, and qualitative methods. Ulla D. Berg's research focuses on the transdisciplinary, transnational, trilingual project *(Im)Mobility in the Americas*, which began with the concerns of scholar-activists from Latin America, the Caribbean, and North America about how state responses to the covid pandemic would affect migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and precarious workers. Radhika Gajjala, Anna DeGalan, Debipreeta Rahut, Syeda Zainab Akbar, and Jhalak Jain explore the affective resonances of online images and tweets of the 'Grandmothers of Shaheen Bagh,' who protested in 2019-2020 against a new rule acquiring proof that both parents are Indian, making it more difficult for Muslims to obtain recognized citizenship. Jürgen Schaflechner's research on the disappearance of non-Muslim women in Pakistan illustrates the politics involved in the affective networks that emerge around this issue and highlights the entanglement of religious nationalism, the market logics of international NGO's, and the logics of social media. Ana Makhashvili offers a comprehensive analysis of far-right practices to hijack the German activists' hashtag #WirhabenPlatz (we have space), which mobilized solidarity for refugees during a crisis at the Turkish-Greek border in 2020 when Greek border police turned back refugees trying to make it to Europe. In her analysis of digital hate speech in the 'Soldiers of Odin', an anti-immigrant street patrol group on Facebook, and a Twitter debate on racism following a Finnish TV talk show, Kaarina Nikunen explores the ways in which modalities and temporalities shape the affective intensities. Tobias Matzner's chapter begins with a critical examination of algorithmic publics, that is, publics based on the algorithmic selection and creation of content both of which are driven by algorithmic measurements of user behavior, using the examples of the filter bubble and Cambridge Analytica. In both cases, Matzner warns against depoliticizing effects, when certain figurations are understood simply as the results of algorithmic manipulation. He strongly suggests more socially situated analyses of affects and publics, such as Lauren Berlant's approach, which focuses not on messages and content but on the conditions of attachment and detachment.

The final section, comprising four chapters, focuses on the media. Verena Straub's case study is on memes that circulated online in 2010 after a public scandal involving former Israeli soldier Eden Abergil who had posted humiliating and dehumanizing photos of herself in front of handcuffed and blindfolded Palestinian male prisoners. Her analysis illustrates how memes function as assemblages in which practices of remixing, reenactment, and repurposing mobilize quite heterogeneous

affective publics. Subarno Chattarji elaborates on the affective dimension of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, which "asserts a domain of feeling that can only be inhabited affectively by those who believe in … [the principles of the Declaration] and cast out "others" who are normatively seen as incapable of such affective belonging" (p. 234). Chattarji takes a closer look at the Asian body as one of these others, juxtaposing the White American affective public with an alternative affective public such as that created by Ocean Vuong in his novel *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019), in which the narrator refuses to be defined by markers of non-belonging and instead imagines communities not yet in place. Gesa Jessen, Jürgen Brokoff and Tim Lörke draw our attention to the role of emotions in literary publics in their analysis of the debate surrounding the novel *Sieben Nächte* (*Seven Nights*) (2017), the book debut of the young German journalist Simon Strauß. The first reviews of the book, which indulges in deviant, nonconformist behavior, were positive, suggesting that it captured the feelings of an entire generation. Soon one of the key questions became whether the book expressed right-wing sentiments and whether Strauß should be considered a right-wing author. For Jessen et al. the debate addresses general questions about the relationship between literature and politics and illustrates how affective publics function.

The very last chapter, by Michaela Rizzoli and Birgitt Röttger-Rössler, addresses the affective dynamics that are part and parcel of ethnographic research, highlighting the concerns raised by the Open Science Movement's call to make research data accessible to a wider public. One of the key insights from discussions and interviews with both German anthropologists and researchers from the Collaborative Research Center *Affective Societies* on issues of data collection, processing, archiving, and sharing is "that the handling of data is a highly affective process" (p. 273). One possible answer to the central question which publics should have access to ethnographic data is the *Affect and Colonialism Web Lab* at the Collaborative Research Center, where journalists, activists, artists and researchers from around the world collaborate on questions of the affective dynamics of colonialism.

This is a truly interdisciplinary and rich book that comprehensively analyzes and theorizes affective publics in different parts of the world. One of the outstanding strengths of the volume is that each chapter elaborates in detail on the historically specific contexts of the emerging affective publics thus contributing to a deeper understanding of affective arrangements and affective dynamics. The chapters on networked publics illustrate the 'struggle for sentiments' that takes place and how, for example, hashtags become sites of contested sentiments. Some authors, such as the team of Gajjala et al. and Schaflechner, point to the cognitive and affective labor required for affective publics to emerge and show the strategies used in digital activism, suggesting the term *affectivism*. Nikunen even speaks of *digital housework* when it comes to digital infrastructure, and points to the much-needed moderation of hate speech.

Many of the chapters address the ambivalences that are part and parcel of affective publics. Schaflechner, for example, speaks of the "inherently ambivalent form of activism" (p. 129), as the affective intensities of social media can produce both counter- publics and new forms of discrimination. One aspect that several authors address is the researchers' own affective involvement – if and how they are affected by the affective publics they analyze. Some see themselves as researcher activists and thus explicitly address what their research does, as in the case of the *(Im)Mobility in the Americas* project discussed by Berg. The chapter by Rizzolli and Röttger-Rössler provides deep insights into the various affective dimensions of data creation, data management and data sharing that are not only applicable to ethnographic fieldwork, but can be read as an invitation to all researchers to pay more attention to the affective involvement of researchers.

This is a well-written book with contributions from scholars of anthropology, media and communication studies, literary and theater studies, and philosophy and computer science. The authors demonstrate how productive and insightful it is to use a wide range of theoretical concepts to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of affective publics. At the same time, there is theoretical coherence, as evidenced by the consistent reference to the theoretical foundations developed by the Collaborative Research Center *Affective Societies*. This edited volume offers valuable insights for scholars and advanced students interested in the conditions of possibility, affective dynamics, modalities, and intensities of contemporary publics.