EDITORIAL

On emotionalisation of public domains¹

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Emotionalisation of the pandemic crisis

While editing this collection of articles exploring the geographies and styles of emotionalisation of public domains, we observed a veritable eruption of emotionalised public discourse in real-time: the COVID-19 pandemic. On some level this was only natural, since the pandemic generates sickness, pain, suffering, the primordial fear of death, and a general sense of existential uncertainty. Without minimising the authentic experiences of suffering and loss, we suggest that the emotionalisation of COVID-19 exemplifies key sociocultural and political processes unfolding in the contemporary world. The pandemic became an emotional event because every event considered significant today is, above all, an emotional one. Every private or collective occurrence is examined through its emotionality – its potential for exciting and moving people. Events are evaluated in terms of the emotional condition of the feeling subject, whether an individual or collective. The emotionality of a memory or experience is the measure of its value, its authenticity, its truth. Accordingly, tracing the discourse of COVID-19 that constitutes the pandemic as an emotional, mental event reveals how the pandemic – like most collective events of our time – has undergone substantial ‘emotionalisation’.

As we describe below in elaborating the notion of ‘emotionalisation’, we refer not only to the legitimisation, intensification and emphasis on emotional discourse in collective spheres of life, both formal and informal (Woodward, 2009; Holmes, 2010; Sieben and Wettergren, 2010), but also to a deep, tacit or overt intertwining of this emotionality with ‘psychologisation’ (De Vos, 2013; Madsen, 2018). In the emotionalisation processes that we discuss in this special issue, emotions are anchored in the concepts and logic of the global therapeutic habitus, the discourse...
of self-development and self-realisation, and bound up with a neoliberal emotional subjectivity. Cultivating, repairing, and managing the self through the interpretation and management of emotions becomes valued, even moral work, for both individuals and collectives.

When this cultural trend encountered COVID-19, the collective condition came to be articulated as a mental event. Overall, COVID-related events became a site for the emotionalisation of public life: population groups were mentally diagnosed, their everyday experiences recast in emotional terms, and each emotional experience was translated into a stressful, discomforting or traumatic one. Facebook promptly responded to the emotional collective mood in April 2020 with a hugging emoji of ‘CARE’.

Indeed, ‘ordinary people’ – while writing in their personal social media pages or being interviewed by media – and political leaders, as well as public health figures and cultural personas alike, identified their personal and collective mental state in terms of ‘stress’ and ‘distress’. The World Health Organization (WHO) issued guidelines for coping with COVID-19-related stress through emotion management, which was rapidly translated into global languages almost without substantive changes. This document defines wellbeing as an unquestionable norm. The disruption of daily routine is identified as a cause of stress harming people’s functioning and productivity, with treatment warranted to reduce suffering. WHO recommends managing COVID-19-related stress in various ways: physical exercise, creative activity, and naturally, the holy grail of the emotionalisation trend – sharing one’s emotions with others. All these messages assume the involvement of an agentic, productive and entrepreneurial neoliberal self. That an institution of global governance such as WHO adopted this psycho-management discourse as a self-evident and universally valid approach, attests to the discourse’s pretence to transcend cultures, economies and politics. It also underscores the aforementioned role ascribed to psychological management practitioners in official public discourse, and particularly the mass media.

At one level, the depression and anxiety of students, doctors, parents, teachers, self-employed professionals and public servants forced to work from home has been represented as a shared, generalised experience. At the same time, stark divisions in risk differentiated those whose jobs require in-person performance from others who can work remotely; the emotional language of selfhood consequently was tailored to particular population groups. For example, the difficulties that university students face have contributed to their psychological diagnosis as a group at risk, seen to require the investment of financial resources, institutional reorganisation, and the sine qua non of professional therapeutic intervention. Discourses regarding the transition to online university teaching during the pandemic have been framed accordingly in terms of coping with mental distress and achieving wellbeing, and have been anchored in the language of self-care: remote teaching was designed to be attuned to students’ ‘emotions’ and designed to assist their ‘coping’. In the context of neoliberal consumerism, the therapeutic logic of emotionalisation prescribes an attitude of care for vulnerable students and legitimises material investments for these ‘clients’ of the academic system.

Another public professional arena where the work of emotionalising the pandemic was evident is healthcare. The increased demand for medical care due to COVID-19 has resulted in resource shortages and compromised some patients’ care and outcomes. Critical analyses reveal that such shortages stemmed from long-
standing disinvestments in public health infrastructure and the outright neglect of pandemic preparation. However, emotional discourses of burn-out, professional distress, and the recommendations for people to pursue ‘wellbeing’ through ‘self-care’, ignore these political roots of the pandemic and its injustices. Institutions undertaking global health governance, from WHO to local health departments, and even universities, encouraged responses to the pandemic through its emotional psychological impact, rather than political-economic activity. As an alternative to the dominant emotionalised discussion, one could imagine that advocating collective organising for robust public health systems and more just resource distribution would be a useful strategy for addressing this suffering. Notably, it is mostly far right populists who have politically mobilised in the pandemic – demanding ‘freedom’ and economic survival – while mainstream, science-based authorities are promoting a depoliticised ‘wellbeing’.

We suggest considering the striking emotionalisation of COVID-19 public discourse as an especially vivid example of processes that the authors of this special issue examine through their empirical fields of study, and possibly as a new configuration of emotionalisation that future issues of the journal will illuminate.

**From emotional turns to emotionalisation**

The concept of ‘emotionalisation’ that we introduce in this collection has arisen from the vast, interdisciplinary literatures flourishing over the past decades; here we will only touch on a fraction of it. The contemporary intensity and extensive reach of emotionality has been christened in the scholarly literature as ‘statistical panic’ (Woodward, 2009), the ‘nervous states’ (Davies, 2018) and the public ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011), and also ‘emotionalised reflexivity’ (Holmes, 2010). These and many other theorists stress the pervasive presence of emotionality in contemporary culture where emotions become more important and formative than anything else. Two scholarly analytic frames are noteworthy: ideas associated with an ‘emotional turn’ and with a ‘therapeutic turn’, both of which inform the meaning of ‘emotionalisation’ we introduce here. Commencing with these theoretical shifts, we build on existing uses of the term ‘emotionalisation’ (for example, Holmes, 2010; Sieben and Wettergren, 2010; Bassols et al, 2013; Ahmed, 2015), and further conceptualise it while grounding it in the pervasiveness of the therapeutic consumerist logic (Illouz, 2018). Hence, the concept of ‘emotionalisation’ that we suggest here highlights the hegemonic and totalising role of the emotional therapeutic culture for shaping the collective imagination and public expression.

First of all, the emotional turn comprises an interdisciplinary dialogue between the very well-established anthropologically oriented approach on the cultural and linguistic construction of emotions (Lutz, 1985; 1986; Wierzbicka, 1999) and the newer ‘turn to affect’ (Leys, 2011), inspired by the neurosciences. The latter examines emotions themselves as material, cognitive or social entities and practices transforming in history, shaped by its configurations (Reddy, 2001; Scheer 2012), and more specifically, by the contemporary cultural condition of overwhelming emotionality of contemporary cultural life (McCarthy, 2017). This remarkable debate over the nature and cultural work of emotions in individual and collective life encourages the broad study of feelings beyond the niche of mainstream social and cultural studies, resulting in burgeoning and cutting-edge academic research with increasing venues...
for intellectual exchange (Holmes et al., 2019; 2020). Perhaps the vibrant scholarly preoccupation with emotionality, whether through critical or normative perspectives, could itself be seen as part of the emotionalisation trend (See for ex. González, 2017), and we hope by this special issue to prompt thinking on this meta research question.

However, our notion of emotionalisation implies not only the intensification and multiplication of explicit emotional expressions, but also their new ‘quality’ – as the emotional becomes both explicitly and tacitly understood within the therapeutic contract and articulated in psychological language. We thus draw on scholarship of the ‘therapeutic turn’, which highlights the ways popularised psychological assumptions and discursive practices developed in psychotherapy have transformed modes of everyday thought and communication (Illouz, 2008). Deploying the concept of therapeutic culture, this literature reveals the centrality of an imagined interiority – the Self – which comes to be articulated through emotion talk and cultivated through emotion management. Indeed, a key assumption of therapeutic culture is that emotions mirror the interiority of the authentic self and are the vehicle for working on that self, a key form of personal virtue and arena for ‘success’.

Critiques of the therapeutic culture developed in the 1980s and 1990s suggest that the therapeutic ethos joins together modern rationality, the capitalist economy and the psychological management of emotions. With the Americanisation of psychology, post-Freudian discourse has shaped the economic institutions of capitalist society and US culture in general (Lasch, 1979; Rieff 1987; Cushman, 1995). Beyond this, therapeutic culture has come to dominate the ways in which the intimate private sphere and the sphere of ordinary life are rationalised and objectified. Emotional needs and resources, translated into the language of the market economy, became known as ‘emotional capitalism’ (Hochschild, 2003; Illouz, 2007; 2008). Scholarly arguments that psychology has been instrumentalised for the needs of the capitalist system subsequently met the critique of neoliberalism as a contemporary cultural regime. Now, scholars demonstrate how neoliberal culture promotes the self-regulating, self-managing subject who seeks wellbeing and happiness (Rose, 1996; Ahmed, 2004; Binkley, 2014). Thus, therapeutic emotional culture is intertwined with the market and consumerist logics.

The ‘therapeutic turn’ in culture takes place when ‘this form of thinking expands from informing the relationship between the individual and therapist to shaping public perception about a variety of issues’ and becomes ‘a means of managing subjectivity’ (Furedi, 2004: 22). Put differently, therapy culture, the culture of self-improvement and later the psycho-managerial style come together with dominant psychological ways of thinking and talking in popular and everyday culture; there is a cultural imperative for a constant quest for the ‘inner Self’, its cultivation, examination, and, of course, realisation, as necessary for ‘success’, ‘happiness’ or even just ‘wellbeing’. An endless reflection on emotions, their interpretations, and actions to manage them is encouraged. This therapeutic language – its concepts and modes of articulating emotions – serves as an anchor for constituting the interiority of the person, in her sense of self, parenthood and all interpersonal relations, from the romantic to the professional. Psychologisation strives to reconstitute all spheres of private individual life.

It is important to clarify the connections and distinctions we see between the emotional and the therapeutic. Certainly, emotions existed before psychological knowledge was developed, and some emotional regimes still remain beyond its
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Influence, even despite the latter’s widespread dissemination (for example, Kirmayer, 2007; Throop, 2010; Lerner, 2015; Tran, 2015; Tooker, 2019). Even within the limits of ‘Western’ culture organised in terms of emotional formats, communities or regimes, emotional expressions are not always articulated in terms of psychological concepts or knowledge. However, the processes of emotionalisation we identify builds on the long presence of psychological therapeutic logic, its language and its global circulation, and thus has an impact on the kinds of emotional expressions that currently prevail (Nehring et al, 2016; Salmenniemi et al, 2019). In adopting the prism of the therapeutic turn, we suggest that the therapeutic is a key precondition for emotionalisation processes: the emotional today is largely therapeutic (see also González, 2017).

Importantly, therefore, therapeutic discourse is not necessarily ‘emotional’ in the explicit sense described by literature of the ‘affective turn’, for therapeutic discourse reaches far beyond the articulation of culturally constructed emotions such as fear, anger, shame and love. The therapeutic discourse’s preoccupation is with an authentic inner Self that is articulated in and through emotional mental states and needs, even when talking about memories of the past or imaginations of the future, professional relations, career success and family conflicts. Talking about yourself is talking about emotions. Therapeutic culture identifies talking about emotions and managing them as the major means of self-constitution and self-transformation (Illouz, 2003; 2008).

With psychological thinking dominating institutions of cultural production, emotions appear as already psychologised: emotions carry the meanings they have in therapeutic logic. Thus, the concept of emotionalisation does not assume that contemporary human beings or culture are more emotional, or that there are more emotions today than in earlier times. But it suggests that the imagination of emotionality, the role of emotional language and expression in daily life, are different. In this sense, emotionalisation is a cultural condition in which emotions are becoming almost a new truth. Emotional expression is associated with sincerity and authenticity. But also, talk of emotions serves as an almost unquestioned source of authority. An argument based on emotional justification is not only legitimate, but may be more robust, persuasive. ‘I feel that …’ is more powerful than ‘I think that …’.

Therefore, in this collection we trace how the powerful normative regime of therapeutic emotionality extends beyond the private domain of individuals and penetrates, in new ways, the institutional fields within public domains – professional, institutional, communal and governmental. In the process, the logic of emotional self-management comes to shape collective categories and institutional roles, and also transforms national identities. In gathering empirical cases for this special collection, we were intrigued by two questions: what happens when the civic, political and national become psychologised? And how is this happening in different global contexts?

**Emotionalisation of institutional, professional and civic domains**

The public appearance of emotionalised, psychologised discourse over the past two decades motivates researchers of all sorts of public fields (such as memory and museums, finances or hospitals, social movements, culinary culture and so on) to take part in the scholarly emotional turn. While the recruitment of emotions has
long been evident in areas such as politics, the media and religion, our collection traces the ways psychological assumptions and language are becoming a legitimate and widely deployed, normative mode of reasoning for a broader range of societal institutions than ever before. Much can be gained by analysing the often unexpected forms that emotionalisation takes and the impacts it produces. It appears that self-fulfilment through professional activity, the establishing of safe spaces and recognition of comfort zones, the right to wellbeing and care, the public recognition of trauma and depression, the collective building of resilience, and the declarations of national shame and pride – all are becoming ethical imperatives in public, political and collective talk and articulated agendas. The collection in this special issue includes cases of emotionalisation in national security, diplomatic, and governmental agencies (Matza, 2021; Sa’ar et al, 2021), universities (Lerner et al, 2021), health and mental healthcare organisations (Kidron, 2021; Bruner and Plotkin Amrami, 2021; Temkina et al, 2021), and communal and civic organisations (Kravel-Tovi, 2021; Shchyttsova, 2021; Wanner, 2021).

The rich cases in this special issue investigate the ways in which psychological emotional language is transforming contemporary public debates, and political, institutional and bureaucratic relations. We aim to advance an understanding of the dramatic impact that emotionalised, psychologised reasoning has in reshaping institutional and political action. As the cases in this issue demonstrate, emotionalisation introduces a new shift in the boundaries between private and public domains; it combines reflections of individual interiority with processes of making sense of social relations and the constitution of collective identities. It reshapes professional relationships and other relations in the public sphere into primarily emotional encounters: for example, between the oppressive power and its vulnerable or traumatised subjects (Kidron, 2021; Sa’ar et al, 2021; Shchyttsova, 2021); between the depressed employer and harassed employee; between the stressed student and mentoring professor (Lerner et al, 2021); between frustrated service provider and unsatisfied client (Temkina et al, 2021). What emerges from these different case studies is that emotionalisation creates both a stage for power relations to be negotiated and the cultural language for doing so.

Embedded in contemporary democratic, legalistic and market regimes, this emotionalisation informs a new basis for claiming identities and rights, and serves as a new social resource – perhaps one of the most important kinds of symbolic capital in contemporary society. The implications of emotionalisation are manifold. On the one hand, in the secular humanistic age, when individuals’ wellbeing and their right to ‘feel comfortable’ are venerated values, empathy towards the Other becomes a virtue that contributes to a less aggressive, less indifferent public culture, one which is more sensitive to the subject’s experiences. On the other hand, turning emotional expression into the imperative of normative public discourse co-opts individual emotions, weakens the unsettling potential of emotional expressions, and subjects them to a hegemonic culture of emotional capitalism and political populism. In this sense, the new, sensitive language of feelings could be seen as an offshoot of a culture of emotional violence and exploitation. That is because the emotional needs of individuals and collectives are managed and realised as subject to a utilitarian consumer culture. The commodification of emotions – or emodities, to use Eva Illouz’s (2018) term – constitutes a combined hegemonic language that is at the same time more intimate and more ‘cold’. In a similar manner, the emotionalisation
of collective discourse redresses political culture and collective identity, which become simultaneously more sensitive and more disciplining, more caring and more instrumental, more emotional and less political. Educational encounters, ethnic relations, memorialisation of the past, interpretation of everyday social relations, and the knowledge of the world are shaped by this duality of the emotional therapeutic culture, while other logics and modes of action get crowded out.

Thus, the intellectual contribution of this discussion goes beyond the fundamental analyses of the social construction of emotions and its cultural variations (Lutz, 1985; Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990; Wierzbicka, 1999), and beyond studies of the role of emotions in sociopolitical mobilisation (Stoler, 2008; Jasper, 2018). By introducing the notion of ‘emotionalisation’, we highlight the transformative role of psychologised emotional logics and rhetoric that are coming to dominate public institutional fields, domains of expertise, and the production of social knowledge in various global contexts.

**Cross-cultural, cross-linguistic perspectives on different political national contexts**

Although, up to this point, we have emphasised the globalising reach of emotionalisation, it is crucial to acknowledge that emotionalisation does not speak the same language everywhere. An important contribution of this special volume is the cross-cultural analysis it presents, with cases highlighting the different configurations of collective emotional ideologies as shaped locally in post-Soviet countries, Israel, the US and the case of Cambodia. The articles illuminate the different styles of emotionalisation forged by distinct national ethos, core collective narratives, and cultural and political regimes. They also take into account the particular ways and different degrees in which professional psychological knowledge and language is integrated (or not) into broader cultural discourses. As such, comparatively scrutinising the emotionalisation of public domains allows us to trace the interplay of global cultural and political trends of therapeutic culture as local actors deploy it for various civil, political and economic agendas.

Because of the historical encounter between capitalist and psychological public culture discussed above, the US context appearing among the case studies can almost be seen as an archetypical emotionalised public domain (Lasch, 1979; Rieff, 1987; Cushman, 1995; Illouz, 2003). The US manifestations of emotionalisation examined in this collection demonstrate the overarching, hegemonic and taken-for-granted character of psychological assumptions and therapeutic talk in the rhetoric of diplomacy, discourse of community and civil society domains, professional scientific, and academic educational settings (Lerner et al; Matza; Kravel-Tovi). The case of post-traumatic discourse and therapeutic policy in Cambodia offers an example of the glocal encounter of this rhetoric within the site of a non-governmental agency’s (NGO) agenda (Kidron).

The Israeli and post-Soviet (Russian, Belorussia and Ukrainian) emotional cultures bring fascinating cases in which the emotionalisation of public spheres is occurring in sites with ideological traditions that are not entirely ‘Western’ but still influenced by European and US emotional regimes. In the Russian and post-Soviet context, where capitalism is relatively young and psychologised cultural knowledge is still in its infancy, therapeutic culture is developing on top of historical strata of emotional
practices, which Lerner has called ‘emotional socialism’ (Lerner, 2015). Yet, research is already showing how new therapeutic forms in Russia are shaping knowledge production, transforming relationships between the individual and the state, and being translated into religious and nationalist forms of morality (Leykin, 2015; Matza, 2018).

The Israeli case is no less complex. Therapeutic rhetoric pervades all areas of Israeli discourse – health and medical settings, family and educational institutions, military, universities and more. This over-psychologisation is tightly linked to Israeli society’s intensive Americanisation and its ongoing neoliberalisation of economic and cultural institutions. However, in Israel psychological ideas are strongly combined with the national ethos, which makes emotionalisation a useful lens for understanding the country’s contemporary political and national conflicts (Plotkin-Amrami, 2013; Rolnik, 2013; Friedman-Peleg, 2014).

The interconnections between the articles highlight three crucial aspects of the dynamics of emotionalisation. The first is the way in which psychological language and emotional reasoning are involved in the construction of the national subject, political regime and communal collective identities. Combining US and international dimensions of emotionalisation, Tomas Matza explores how the late-Cold War track two diplomacy deployed humanistic psychology and turned it into emotional warfare. Michal Kravel-Tovi argues that sociodemographic discourse on the ‘Jewish continuity crisis’ in the US emotionalises Jewish identity and citizenship in Jewish community and is nourished by ‘anxiety’ discourses. Finally, Amalia Sa’ar, Sarai B. Aharoni and Alisa Lewin show how the replacement of the political with the emotional in a grassroots discourse of national security in the Gaza envelope region of Israel gives residents significant agency to cope with the ongoing crisis while deepening their misrecognition of political power.

Second, two cases examine how emotionalisation affects interactions in the professional spheres of medical services and educational encounters. Tamar Kaneh-Shalit, Julia Lerner and Claudia Zbenovich show how academic teaching is changing globally through adopting neoliberal and therapeutic logics, processes evident in the emotionalisation of the university; and they examine how these processes gain different cultural expressions in various national versions. Anna Temkina, Daria Litvina and Anastasia Nokvunskaya reveal the hybrid emotional style constituting Russian maternity care services, where both bureaucratic paternalist and consumerist emotional logics reign simultaneously.

A third set of dynamics this issue explores is the integration of emotionalisation in political conflicts and power regimes, helping us to make sense of how emotionalisation mediates states of violence and distress. Galia Plotkin Amrami and José Brunner demonstrate how Israeli mental health practitioners emotionalise the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without depoliticising it. They examine how two ostensibly opposite political attitudes both deploy psychological expertise to address the condition of violent conflict. Carol Kidron shows how the globalised trauma-related subject created by human rights discourse and NGOs meets with friction in the Cambodian emotional culture of remembrance of collective and individual pain; she traces the syncretic form of subjectivity resulting from this encounter. Catherine Wanner analyses the religiously infused talk therapy that military chaplains in Ukraine offer to soldiers as they transition to civilian life. The Ukrainian state harnesses religion for therapeutic purposes with the goal of transforming soldiers into high-functioning, religiously committed, patriotic, moral citizens; and chaplains shift the emotional
tenor of public domains by mobilising the therapeutic qualities of religion to heal the wounds of war. Tatiana Shchyttsova discusses a particular Belorussian version of collective depression from a philosophical phenomenological perspective. She shows how this ‘social disease’ emerges from the combination of a Western individualised, neoliberal emotional ethos and the Soviet cultural-political heritage that characterises the contemporary authoritarian condition in Belarus.

Through these three theoretical foci, this collection reveals stunning changes currently under way as civic consciousness gets increasingly anchored in logics of psychologised emotionality. We reveal how such processes are imbued with moral imperatives, normativities and power relations – some of which are explicit and others, implicit. Moreover, the authors show us how the emotionalisation of public spheres generates modifications in the roles of institutions, including their adopting new responsibilities, forms of expertise and competencies. Presented together, these studies create a path-breaking, kaleidoscopic view into the transcultural translation of emotionalisation into local public spheres.

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Note
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Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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