EDITORIAL

Emotions and the ‘truths’ of contentious politics: advances in research on emotions, knowledge and contemporary contentious politics

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In a world of multiple crises – the heating of the planet, public health emergencies, economic meltdowns, sociopolitical polarisation and so on – truth is often politicised and then weaponised for political gain. This ‘post-truth’ rhetoric currently seems so prevalent that many of us now avoid debating reasonable questions about politics, policy and society. The rhetoric has also led to increasing questions about the role and importance of expertise (Felt et al., 2007; Weible and Satabier, 2009), greater attention paid to authorities’ ideologies, uncertainty, contradictions and mistakes (Durnová, 2019), and sometimes heated arguments about how evidence and ‘truth’ should be used to guide governments and social policy (Torgerson, 2010).

The politicisation and weaponisation of truth have additionally rejuvenated portrayals of emotions and reason as opposing forces (Alexander, 2013), constructing a societal division between a purportedly emotional or ignorant public and a supposedly fact-oriented elite (Durnová, 2019). In this way, weaponised truth is both a result and cause of contentious politics. This dynamic is evinced in the discourses of post-truth phenomena, such as the Brexit vote, clashes between liberal cosmopolitanism and socially conservative values, and anti-covid protests.

Yet, going beyond this recursive dynamic, the tension between emotions and reason may also be generative of politics, including cultivating and bolstering democratic politics. That is, while the division between masses and elites based on emotions and ‘true’ knowledge appears to threaten social cohesion and the mutual
respect necessary for democracy to function, it also extends a long-standing tradition behind civic authority and, ultimately, may support democratic politics. Namely, the tradition that tried to cleave bureaucracy and modern governing from personal feelings and moods also helped codify in liberal democracies the public’s right to access and contribute to authoritative knowledge. This right to know has created an arena of many types of knowledge, where citizens and citizens’ groups debate, argue for, believe in and deny all sorts of expertise and knowledge – often on emotional grounds (Felt and Fochler, 2010). In other words, the invocation of emotions in the creation of knowledge – not to mention post-truth claims – can contribute to the foundations of democratic politics.

Our far more general and simple point is that the role of emotions in knowledge- and truth-making, and how this process relates to (contentious) politics, is complex. We, therefore, undertook this special issue to engage in a wide-ranging dialogue – crossing the sociology of emotions, political sociology, social theory and other areas – to shed new light on how recognising the inherent role of emotions in knowledge and politics could help advance our understanding of current political tension and conflict.

Achieving this goal required new analytical tools and concepts. For example, while recent research on emotions in contemporary politically contentious settings has often emphasised ‘affective polarisation’ (Iyengar et al, 2012; Gidron et al, 2019), tracing the reasons for and extent of people’s dislike for an imagined sociopolitical ‘outgroup’, the scholarship in this special issue adopts more critical and far-reaching perspectives. It examines the emergence and composition of groups on both sides of social divides, their political motivations, rhetoric and strategies, and the social and discursive processes that legitimise them as meaningful groups – all the while treating emotions as both the drivers and results of political attitudes and actions.

Emotions, in this issue, are both individual and collective experiences. On the individual level, emotions appear as affective and moral commitments influencing distrust, intuitive beliefs, and social and political behaviour. On the collective level, emotions co-produce conflicts about objective versus subjective truth, create allies and opponents over a disputed issue, and make public icons dialectic, embodying polarised public discourse. Emotions in this issue are also dynamic – both the cause and result, looping back on themselves to influence the next iteration of emotions. They constitute processes that, for example, mobilise political actions and strategic positions (Gould, 2004) while also contributing to the discourse that subsequently frames these same political actions (Durnová, 2018). As a whole, this issue’s approach to emotions is used to better understand the different ways emotions are related to knowledge and together create, sustain and temper contentious politics. It also reflects the reality that emotions do different things at different stages of democratic political action; they can be both productive and destructive of democratic participation and decision making. Thus, rather than, combining to form a comprehensive typology describing emotions in knowledge production and democratic politics, the articles in this issue consider different aspects of emotions and show how they manifest during different processes of knowledge construction and kinds of political situations. The articles show that emotions are knowledge-making practices fuelling trust or distrust, depending on the social and political contexts in which they emerge, are shared and understood.
In the issue’s first article, Vanessa Bittner (2023) explores the connection between emotions and truth with the concept of ‘dialectic icons’. This concept refers to prominent public figures entangled in contentious and divisive political discussions. These individuals evoke strong emotional reactions and become highly mediated symbols of conflict. The resulting emotional energy resonates deeply among audiences, often leading them to align within ideological camps as a response. However, what sets these dialectic icons apart is the active and direct engagement that audiences, particularly through social media, have in shaping and influencing these discourses. Taking the case of Colin Kaepernick, the former professional (US) football player turned activist, and his protests during the playing of the US national anthem, Bittner highlights how the controversial nature, widespread attention, interactive dynamics and prominent visibility of dialectic icons work in tandem to amplify existing societal polarisation. The concept of dialectic icons can be regarded as a valuable tool for understanding the emergence and dynamic of spaces of contention for public audiences. By doing so, it helps explain the intricate processes underlying the construction of shared meanings and truths within a polarised social landscape. Moreover, the article demonstrates how discursive aspects of emotions can be analysed to explain polarised debates.

Next, Hannes Lagerlöf and Jane Pettersson’s (2023) article examines the evolving dynamics between nuclear waste management (NWM) actors and the public (and the public’s perceptions), particularly in the context of siting repositories for spent nuclear fuel and high-level waste. The NWM actors’ traditional approach involved presenting ‘objective facts’ to counter public fears, depicting themselves as rational and the public as emotional. However, persistent public opposition prompted a shift. NWM actors now explicitly address public emotions. The authors analyse this as a form of ‘discursive projection’, where policy reflects implementers’ understanding of rationality versus emotionality, establishing an ‘emotion regime’. This regime dictates which emotions align with the perceived ‘truth’ of repositories. Through an emotional-sociological lens, the study uncovers the transformation of this emotion regime, shedding light on the emotions seen as threats to reason versus those aiding rationality, revealing the emotional nuances of policy formation.

In their article, Allegra Fullerton, Kayla Gabehart, Jill Yordy and Christopher Weible (2023) explore the interplay of emotions and sociopolitical contexts, specifically how opposing advocacy groups attribute emotions to allies and adversaries in the setting of a contentious US gas pipeline project. Their findings show how alignment with one of two coalitions corresponds with specific emotional tones. In addition, allies tend to associate positive emotions with fellow members and negative emotions with opponents. These findings illustrate the importance of emotions in social movements and contentious politics and enhance our understanding of their role in heated political scenarios.

Anna Berg (2023) delves into the critical issue of misinformation uptake, which has implications for political shifts and responses to crises, speaking to the broader contentious politics literature. Drawing on affect theory, and departing from prevailing research that characterises emotions as disruptive to analytical thinking, the article introduces ‘information enthusiasm’ to elucidate the emotional connections that tie users to these alternative news sources. Through interviews with 28 German alternative news consumers, Berg uncovers emotional links such as curiosity, excitement, collection, routine comfort and self-expression. By revealing
how these emotional appeals create constant anticipation and foster continuous engagement with misinformation, the article helps us better understand the role of emotions in the consumption of misinformation and contemporary alternative news sources.

John Maldonado (2023) challenges the binary characterisation of COVID-19 scepticism as pro-science versus anti-science. Through fieldwork at ‘medical freedom’ rallies, Maldonado argues that COVID-19 sceptics perceive themselves as upholding true science, viewing mainstream scientific consensus as corrupted by political biases and elite greed. To understand the distrust towards scientific claims, Maldonado explores the role of emotions in supporting affective and moral commitments, and how these commitments shape individuals’ acceptance of information, perception of risk and construction of partisan epistemologies. In the context of COVID-19, emotional processes drive an individual’s non-compliance with public health measures, which is a manifestation of the person’s epistemic orientation. The findings suggest that scepticism arises not from rejecting scientific claims as a whole, but from questioning their legitimacy, particularly concerning concerns of political bias and the integrity of the scientific process. These insights support previous research on COVID-19 scepticism and extend the discussions on feelings of resentment and dispossession in conservative contexts to the realm of public engagement with science.

In the issue’s final article, Mehr Latif, Pete Simi, Kathleen Blee and Matthew DeMichele (2023) examine the formation of racist beliefs. Drawing on life history interviews with former members of White supremacist groups, the study explores cognitive pathways and moral judgements related to racism. While existing literature has focused on implicit bias, explicit racist beliefs have received less attention. Moreover, previous studies on racist movements have neglected the intuitive processes associated with racism. The authors propose that racist beliefs are shaped by intuitive processes, wherein cognitive schemas, physical sensations and negative emotions play a crucial role. These intuitive beliefs, encoded early in life, can be reactivated later, leading individuals to embrace racist beliefs and even participate in racist movements. The findings align with Haidt’s social intuition model, highlighting the connection between moral judgements and intuitive pathways. Early childhood experiences and shared emotions in social contexts contribute to the development of racist judgements and the formation of a social imaginary that delineates inclusion and exclusion.

The articles in this special issue explore the intersection of emotions and knowledge in various settings of public debate and contentious politics. They provide valuable lessons for how to concretely engage with contemporary forms of misinformation, science denial, polarisation and other societal challenges contributing to our current ‘post-truth’ era. The articles also open new avenues for research on how emotions and knowledge are entwined, and how this relationship can both be shaped by and shape political action, discourse and debates. By collecting them together and putting them in dialogue with one another, we hope to help inspire new analytical tools and concepts that help advance our understanding of the connection between emotions, knowledge and (post-)truth, and contentious politics.

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