4. Contested Emotions

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the concept of *contested emotions*. Moving beyond traditional views of emotions as drivers of conflict or modes of debate and negotiation, the concept emphasizes how emotions themselves become focal points of disagreement in contemporary social and political conflicts, exploring how emotional responses are increasingly subject to normative and discursive contestation. Drawing on examples from climate activism, gender politics, and immigration debates, the chapter identifies three grounds on which emotions become contested: formal (fittingness to an object), social (norm conformity), and cultural (values and conventions). It argues that these contestations are rooted in broader socio-historical developments that frame emotions as being manageable and at one's disposal, having instrumental value, and being morally significant. The chapter concludes by highlighting the implications of emotional contestation for conflict dynamics and democratic discourse, calling for greater recognition of emotions as both shaped by and shaping collective struggles.

Social conflict typically refers to disagreement or tension between individuals and groups regarding a particular issue that is at stake. Existing research has long highlighted the central role of emotions in conflict and conflict resolution, chiefly as drivers of mobilization and the modes of discourse and behavior in which conflict is enacted. The concept of *contested emotions* broadly reflects the observation that in many contemporary conflicts, emotions have become contested issues *in themselves*. The conflicts in question not only revolve around the actual issue that is at stake, for example, an adequate response to global warming or the most effective immigration policies. Instead, emotions, too, become central objects of contestation in these conflicts. More specifically, it is the emotions that people experience—or do not experience—vis-á-vis a particular issue that become contested.

Traditional views have it that opposing parties argue about ultimate goals, the most successful strategies to reach a goal, the consequences of goals and strategies, the morally sound position in view of an issue, and the like. It is less obvious, however, that they also tend to argue about the emotions that the conflicting parties—or citizens more generally—are supposed to feel or express in relation to the contested issue. Conflicting parties can be observed to argue about the *right* or *wrong* way to feel regarding an issue at stake, about the *adequate* or *inadequate* emotional response, as well as over the *appropriate* or *inappropriate* affective experience in relation to the conflict. These enunciations typically include different addressees, i.e., different subjects of emotional experience, primarily political in- and out-groups, but also bystanders or the general public.

The concept of *contested emotions* emphasizes specific kinds and intensities of emotions as they become integral parts of the debates and discourses surrounding a particular social conflict. These can be the emotions that, from an analytical standpoint, have given rise to or drive a particular conflict, but it can also be emotions that conflicting parties single out to be particularly instrumental to fight or resolve a conflict. The concept shall aide researchers to better understand the affective forces that propel pertinent conflicts, the discourses of conflict, and the social processes that contribute to the experience and understanding of emotions. In this regard, the concept raises a number of intriguing questions: On what grounds do people contest and criticize emotions? What specific understanding of emotions informs acts

of contestation? What understanding is, theoretically, required so that emotions can be contested in a meaningful way? What are the individual and social implications of disputing other's emotions? In the following, I will outline some initial answers to these questions, first by providing some examples and conceptual details and, second, by analyzing the different grounds on which emotions can be contested and, third, by briefly outlining how the idea gained traction that emotions are "contestable" in the first place, providing some context with regards to closely related concepts.

Background

The abundance of contested emotions in contemporary conflicts is best illustrated with some examples. The first set of examples illustrates the general normativity of emotions and emotion discourses, which can be conceived as a precursor of contestation, whereas the second set is more tuned towards contestation as such. In an interview with the German *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in January 2025 on the second presidency of Donald J. Trump, Mark Lilla, a political scientist at Columbia, is quoted: "Our reaction to Trump should not be fear, but rage. And valor." (Strauß, 2025).[1] In an article on the Israel-Palestine war, the German tabloid *BILD* in October 2023 featured a headline announcing: "Why one has to be compassionate with Gaza." (BILD, 2023).[2] Nigel Biggar (2017), a professor of theology at Oxford, in a much-discussed commentary in *The Times*, requests that Britons feel neither guilt nor shame in view of their colonial past. A little later, in *The Guardian*, his Oxford colleague James McDougall (2018) objects: "The history of empire isn't about pride—or guilt". From these examples that recommend certain emotions, argue for the merit of other emotions, or claim the inappropriateness of still other emotions, it is only a short way to cases in which emotions are more explicitly contested and related to conflicting parties. The contestation of emotions in these cases often implies criticism and the accusation and vituperation of groups and individuals. For example, "toxic masculinity" for some involves socially inappropriate and psychologically dysfunctional male ways of feeling and of relating to one's own and other's emotions. Activists and scholars have singled out and criticized what they identify as the typically masculine discouragement of emotional vulnerability, the suppression of

[1] Author's own back-translation.
[2] Author's own translation.

emotions, and the limiting of male emotional expressiveness (e.g., Hooks, 2004, pp. 60–61; see also Pop Culture Detective, 2016). Because these emotional traits are considered instrumental in fueling gender-based conflict, including misogyny, violence, and aggression, men are called upon to "unlearn" these emotion repertoires, for example, in a health and well-being program offered by Brown University (n.d.) on "Unlearning Toxic Masculinity."

Climate change is another example, where especially younger climate activists are accused of experiencing the "wrong" and "inadequate" feelings by climate change denialists, in particular hysteria, panic, dread, and anxiety, and of generally experiencing too intense feelings and emotions. On the other hand, climate activists frequently complain over denialists or the general public being emotionally numb, not feeling what would be, in their view, necessary and appropriate to feel. Greta Thunberg's now famous lines at the Word Economic Forum in 2019 are a particularly bold case: "I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic."

A final example concerns immigration, where those with outspoken anti-immigration attitudes blame supporters of more liberal immigration regimes for their inadequate and excessive sympathy and compassion towards refugees and, generally, their exuberant sensitivity. Conversely, the anti-immigration faction is frequently blamed for their inhumane and immoral coldness, apathy, and scorn, and their lack of sympathy and compassion.

The probing of others' emotions, however, is not germane to social conflict. It is indeed more common and widespread—though also not widely researched—in everyday social life, where emotions are frequently scrutinized, critiqued, questioned, and challenged. We tell our spouses that their anger at a friend is unjustified because no bad intentions were involved. We tell a classmate that there is no reason to be afraid of the upcoming exam because she studied relentlessly and knows her stuff. We tell our friend to cheer up eventually and to let go of his bad mood—we're at a party, after all. And we tell our children—and sometimes also adults—that they should be ashamed for what we consider gross misbehavior.

Although the challenging of others' emotions in personal relationships and the contestation of emotions in political conflict share a range of common principles and raise numerous questions for the science of emotion, there are important differences. In political contexts, contested emotions are closely tied to a broader ongoing conflict and disputed issue and are often being linked to moral standards and integrity. They involve groups that are invested in a disputed issue, and therefore, the emotions that become the targets of contestations are often *political* emotions, embodying some degree of groupness, collectivity, and social identity (Szanto & Slaby, 2020).

Why should we care about contested emotions? There are at least two reasons: First, the contestation of an emotion will almost certainly lead to changes in this emotion; it may alter its meaning and initiate processes of emotion management and regulation, but it can also be defended or shielded from attempts at contestation. In any case, contestation is likely to affect how people experience, express, and articulate their emotions. The second reason is that the challenging and criticizing of someone's emotions—in the context of political conflict, but also in social relationships—can be experienced as a fundamental and painful attack on the individual or collective self. This is because we typically cannot change our feelings and emotions towards a particular object or person in the same way as we can change beliefs and convictions.

Different from most beliefs, the ways in which we feel towards the world are not at our full disposal, because they are deeply embodied and internalized during socialization. Admittedly, we can regulate and alter our emotions to some degree, but the very purpose of emotions is that they, at least to some extent, "control" *us* (in the sense of prompting verbal and non-verbal behavior and making certain courses of action more likely than others). If someone questions my belief that nuclear energy is a sustainable technology and provides ample evidence to the contrary, I might be reluctant at first, but may ultimately decide to change my belief. If, however, someone criticizes and maybe even ridicules my fear over nuclear energy, I will almost certainly interpret this as an attack on who I am, on my self

and my identity, as an individual and as a member of a social or political group. It is clear, then, that contesting emotions can substantially affect the course of conflict and the ways we feel.

Grounds of Contestation

The concept of *contested emotions* proposes that emotions, much like beliefs, opinions, or attitudes, are frequent issues of contestation. Contestation means that emotions are challenged, questioned, disputed, and criticized by others. This can pertain, quite generically, to particular emotions, for example, anger, joy, guilt, pride, or shame, to their intensity, or to specific components of an emotion, for instance, a subjective feeling, a facial or vocal expression, a linguistic articulation or a cognitive appraisal. Contestations can be direct, when targeting an emotion or a component of an emotion, but they can also be indirect by questioning or criticizing, in a more abstract fashion, certain norms, rules, and practices related to emotions or entire emotion regimes (see below).

But what are the grounds on which emotions are contested? Why, and regarding which criteria, do people think that others' emotions are "right" or "wrong," "appropriate" or "inappropriate," "adequate" or "inadequate"? In the following, I will discuss three ideal types of grounds on which emotions can be challenged and criticized, and I call these the *formal*, *social*, and *cultural* grounds of the appropriateness of emotions. These are different from, but overlapping with, the forms of appropriateness discussed by D'Arms and Jacobson (2023) and the specific standards of appropriateness for political emotions developed by Szanto and Tietjen (in press). My distinction is primarily an analytical one, a heuristic tool, and most empirical cases of contested emotions will refer to multiple or overlapping grounds.

Formal appropriateness

Discussion of the formal appropriateness of emotions are well-established in the philosophy of emotion. Basically, this type of appropriateness is fixated on the target object of an emotion and requires a particular (lay as well as theoretical) understanding of emotions. This understanding broadly assumes that emotions have an intentional structure and represent evaluative relationships with the world. Prototypical evaluative relations are considered the *formal* objects of emotions, embodying specific

evaluative properties: imminent danger in the case of fear, mistreatment as the cause of indignation, or loss in the case of grief (e.g., Teroni, 2007). In contrast to these formal objects, the intentional (or target) objects of emotions are those acts, objects, events, or individuals at which a particular emotion is directed in a specific case, for example, my anger at the driver of a car who is blocking my path as a cyclist (see also the discussion by Szanto and Tietjen (in press), for the case of political emotions).

Given that emotions embody the evaluative properties of objects (or persons, events, etc.), i.e., the properties that make these objects appear good or bad, desirable or undesirable, likable or despicable to us, we can raise the question of the formal appropriateness of a particular emotion—and we can contest an emotion on these grounds. For example, the formal object of guilt is a wrongdoing for which I am (at least partly) responsible. If, however, I experience guilt in view of a wrongdoing for which I cannot be held responsible, this guilt is inappropriate and can thus be criticized or disputed. This type of appropriateness is sometimes also referred to as the "fittingness" of an emotion (D'Arms & Jacobsen, 2023). Hence, emotions can meaningfully be judged over whether they "correctly" instantiate the evaluative properties of a given target object, based on a consensus in emotion theory regarding the formal objects of emotions. This consensus, however, is likely to shift with the very meanings of discrete emotion concepts (e.g., shame, guilt, anger) across time and culture.

In many cases, these evaluative properties can be clearly determined, for example a thunderstorm posing a danger to a group of hikers, or a hideous crime that has been committed by a clearly identified perpetrator on willful intent. Hence, I can easily criticize my son's fear of a harmless spider because the spider does not constitute a danger. I can meaningfully question a friend's shame because her behavior, by any standards, has in no way put her in a bad light in the eyes of others. Criticizing or questioning someone's emotions when the evaluative properties of the target object are commonly accepted and undisputed will thus typically amount to a critique of the *beliefs* about the target object underlying the emotion in question. Hence, I am not actually criticizing my son's fear, but I am criticizing his belief that the spider is dangerous. This would constitute a *weak* form of emotional contestation, because it targets more a belief than the emotion. I might, however, specifically criticize his fear as being

recalcitrant, irrational, and even pathological. This, I suggest, is a *strong* and usually invective form of emotional contestation because it targets the entire person and how it relates, in feeling, to the world.

In many political arenas, the evaluative properties of the things at stake are usually difficult to determine, they are *in themselves* matters of debate and contestation. Whether immigration is more of a cultural challenge or more of an economic requirement for industrialized societies is a hotly debated issue. The threat posed by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has been a matter of ongoing debate, especially at the beginning of the pandemic. And the impact of climate change is likewise a matter of ongoing debate. Because the evaluative properties of things that are at stake in the political arena are hardly ever consensual, it becomes almost impossible to clearly establish the formal appropriateness of a particular emotion in these contexts. Why, then, do people engage in contesting others' emotions in these cases, and is this at all meaningful? One answer is that emotions tend to work as *discursive shortcuts* (much like hashtags) for complex matters that are difficult to appraise. Instead of engaging in the often arduous work of reconstructing and understanding one's own and others' deliberative and normative stances on an issue (and their reasons), one resorts to assessments of emotions: If you don't feel like I do with regard to this or that issue, you are getting it plainly wrong, have entirely different goals and desires, or different ethical and moral values, all of which provide reasons for critique and contestation. And because emotions tend to *embody* the evaluative properties of, say, welfare benefits or immigration, they act like a political gyroscope. The fuzziness of the evaluative properties of these kinds of targets, on the one hand, makes criticizing emotions on formal grounds an intricate and complex, sometimes even a futile endeavor. On the other hand, individual as well as collective emotions in these arenas are often seen as not just representing some externally established evaluative property, but as actively constituting this property. Then, the entire person or social group and their emotional compass come under scrutiny, can be questioned and contested, which is likely to add heat to an ongoing conflict.

Social appropriateness

In addition to the formal appropriateness, we can contest emotions on the grounds of their *social* appropriateness. That is, we assess emotions not only with respect to their fittingness, but also regarding

the question of whether they are socially appropriate or suitable to a particular situation. Whether an emotion is socially appropriate is not determined by the (conventional) association between an emotion concept and the evaluative properties of a target object, but rather by judgments of the self and others in light of applicable norms, rules, and expectations governing a particular situation. These standards can be personal, for example when it comes to impression management and the presentation of self (Goffman), but are mostly social—we are adapting our emotions, in particular our emotional expressions, to the expectations of others. Research has coined the term "feeling rules" to refer to social norms that specifically govern the experience and expression of emotions, specifying what is emotionally appropriate, correct, and expected in certain situations (Hochschild, 2012).

Feeling rules have different scopes and categories of addressees, which are immediately relevant for contested emotions. Some feeling rules pertain to clearly defined social contexts and addressees, such as norms of emotional expression in some service sector jobs. The scope of other norms is fuzzier and includes broader categories of individuals (for instance defined by gender, kinship, or social status) and a wider array of social situations. Crossing the border to moral and ethical norms, some emotion norms are independent of specific contexts and situations and might simply proscribe ways of feeling that are considered virtuous or vicious.

Whereas formal appropriateness is rooted in the correspondence of formal object, target object, and emotion, the criteria for social appropriateness are more varied, and so are contestations of emotions. I might criticize a friend for his lack of empathy and awareness in an encounter with a member of a minority group, because this is what is commonly expected or because of underlying moral and ethical concerns. I might also criticize others for their lack of outrage and indignation in view of misguided political developments, as Stéphane Hessel (2010) has done in his popular essay *Indignez-vous!*, implying that these emotions are the appropriate ones to feel because they prompt resistance and mobilization. Importantly, a particular emotion can be formally appropriate, but is considered socially inappropriate, as is the case with many negative group-based emotions targeted at minorities or disadvantaged groups.

In principle, feeling rules are thoroughly *political* things that only rarely emerge by accident. Instead, individual or collective actors often have strong incentives to implement emotion norms or entire "emotional regimes" (Reddy, 2001) that serve their interests, in politics, religion, or the economy. An individual's or a group's emotions can be criticized, and even be sanctioned, because they are deemed to violate prevailing emotion norms. But also actions that attack a prevailing emotional regime or seek to abolish specific emotion norms count as instances of emotional contestations, for example feminist struggles targeting victim shame in the wake of sexual abuse.

Cultural appropriateness

The cultural appropriateness of emotions makes up the third ground on which emotions can be contested. While feeling rules specify which emotions to show or feel in a particular situation, cultural ideals of "good" and "right," "bad" and "wrong" emotions and their associated social expectations (sometimes also referred to as *emotion norms*) are notably more generic and not tied to specific situations. In this sense, there is a clear parallel to the distinction between values (or value systems, value orientations) and social norms commonly drawn in the social sciences.

The idea that emotions can be culturally appropriate or inappropriate rests on the observation that most emotions are, in historical perspective, more or less *en vogue*, are at the center of public attention or remain invisible, and are more or less important for social affairs (Frevert, 2013). This cultural attention to specific emotions, some being "all over place" and others remaining hidden and unacknowledged, usually goes along with strong evaluative judgments of these emotions. Culture contributes to our understanding of which emotions are considered good or bad, vicious or virtuous. This is probably most evident and comprehensive in religious doctrines, with guilt, for example, assuming a prominent role in Christian cultures. Virtue ethics suggests that one should strive for modest intensities in emotions rather than for the extremes. Moreover, cultures differ significantly in view of the emotions they deem important for social life, for instance, shame being a prominent and much-required emotion in some cultures while remaining unacknowledged and repressed emotion in others (e.g., Scheff, 2003).

The criteria for this form of appropriateness are thus primarily based on normative *ideals* of emotions, which are part of the prevailing emotional culture or style (Illouz, 2008) of a society and against which occurring emotions are constantly evaluated and judged. These ideals, and therefore the cultural appropriateness of emotions, vary across historical periods and cultures, as well as across social fields, milieus, and institutions within societies. Different social and cultural contexts determine how value and attention are allotted to different emotions, for example in politics (anger, rage), in social relationships (mindfulness, body shame), or in personality development (empathy, sensitivity).

This evaluative cultural centering (or de-centering) of emotions includes their representation and discussion in public discourse, media, arts, and literature, as well as various rituals and practices revolving around these emotions (e.g., religion, sports, family). Cultural practices embody shared, conventional, and commonly expected forms of behavior in society. Because emotions are integral parts of many cultural practices, they also offer reasons for establishing the appropriateness of emotions. When cultural practices are challenged or come into conflict which each other (think about religious practices or modes of travel), it is likely that also their emotional dimensions become issues of contestation.

Some examples will help illustrate the contestation of emotion based on considerations of their cultural appropriateness. Although anger and rage (or any other emotions, for that matter) have, for a long time, been considered inappropriate in public debates about social issues (following a Habermasian ideal), they are being rehabilitated as adequate and much-needed ways of expression, especially in feminist and antiracist struggles. This is evident in a piece Myisha Cherry (2020), a philosopher at UC Riverside, wrote for *The Antlantic* on the Black Lives Matter protests, titled "Anger Can Build a Better World." The article contests the policing of anger and its understanding as "antithetical to love," instead positioning it as an expression of "compassion for the downtrodden and the desire for a better world." A second example is "female rage," which, at least since Audrey Lorde's (1981) *The Uses of Anger*, has occupied a central place in conflicts regarding gender equality and feminist claims. As acts against the

social control of female anger in response to suppression and discrimination, calls for its rehabilitation have been published widely in academic and non-academic outlets. They have recently also entered, in commodified form, popular culture with Taylor Swift's attempt at trademarking "Female Rage: The Musical" ("Direct a Film or Female Rage," 2024). A final example is epitomized by the phrase "owning the libs,"[3] which refers to practices of the U.S. far right and conservatives to elicit strong and aversive emotional reactions amongst liberals, for instance "rolling coal" (e.g., Marcotte, 2018). Here, the deliberate "triggering" of certain emotional sensibilities—often accompanied by a "fuck your feelings" slogan—can be interpreted as an emotional "enactment" of affective polarization (e.g., von Scheve, 2024). It is a form of contesting alleged liberal emotion norms that demand awareness, mindfulness, and attention to other people's sensitivities, often as part of a broader regime of "political correctness."

Conditions of Contestation

One intriguing question is why individuals or groups would contest others' emotions in the first place. The different forms of appropriateness provide several reasons, but underlying these reasons is the more basic assumption that people can somehow respond to these contestations, in particular by *changing* their emotions to make them more appropriate, based on insight, persuasion, coercion, and the like. Traditional as well as most scientific views, however, assume that emotions do not come with infinite degrees of freedom. This means that we are not typically "choosing" our emotions as we choose between chocolate bars or political parties. Emotions, different from many verbal and non-verbal behaviors, are not entirely at our disposal, they often arise involuntarily, even against our will, and we often passively endure our emotions. Arguably, we can regulate and control our emotions to some degree, but their inaccessibility is a vital feature. Why, then, would we harbor the idea of contesting others' emotions?

The viability of the concept of contested emotions relies on three broader socio-historical developments that have gradually changed everyday conceptions of emotions. They have contributed to the emergence of an understanding of emotions as a faculty that is under our immediate voluntary control, a capacity

[3] I owe this example to Philipp Wunderlich.

that can be put to use to serve our (or other people's) goals and interests. I will briefly summarize these developments that can be categorized under labels of work and employment, self-optimization, and emotional reflexivity. As Arlie Hochschild (2012) and Eva Illouz (2008) have argued, workplaces since the 1950s have seen a continuous shift in the valuation of human emotion as resources that can be exploited to serve corporate goals, at all levels of a corporate hierarchy. This shift is paralleled by the idea that emotions can in fact be managed, controlled, and regulated, and this includes both self-regulation and regulation induced by third parties (e.g., management, superiors, corporate culture). The second notable development concerns the advent of a "therapeutic culture" (Illouz 2008) that frames the self (and its emotions) as perpetually vulnerable and in need of healing and improvement. The therapeutic culture is joined by a new spirit of capitalism that emphasizes the instrumental *optimization* of the self, including its emotions, to live up to the demands of "neoliberal" work (Neckel, 2005). Both therapeutic culture and self-optimization have significantly contributed to an image of emotions as experiences that can be controlled, curated, and configured. Finally, and certainly a consequence of these developments, contemporary societies see unprecedented levels of (→ Emotional Reflexivity) . In a nutshell, this means that societies have become preoccupied with emotions and devote a substantial amount of citizens' attention to their own and others, individual and collective emotions. This is evident, for example, in the surge of references to emotion in politics and the economy, various indicators to diagnose emotions at these levels (e.g., affective polarization, market sentiment), and, last but not least, in the scientific attention paid to the emotions. This attention to emotions is a precondition for the judgment and evaluation of emotions against the different criteria of appropriateness and thus for their contestation.

Outlook

Contested emotions become integral parts of social conflicts in various ways and for various reasons. In this way, contestations shape emotions as well as the conflicts to which they are attached. To prevent misunderstanding, the concept of contested emotions does not imply that there are conflicts that are somehow void of affect and emotion. It rather states that in some conflicts, emotions become, in a

reflexive and discursive way, conflictual issues in themselves. This prompts several yet unresolved questions that I cannot address here but that should be at the center of attention of future research. The observation that emotions become contested issues in social conflicts is likely to be related to the acknowledgment of feelings as justifications for actions and as premises in argumentation. Institutionalized programs of awareness and mindfulness, for example, tend to give priority to mere *feelings* of offense and injury as justifications for sanctions, in particular, social exclusion. This, evidently, paves the way for contesting these feelings. The entanglement of social conflict and emotions, at various levels, also provokes the question of whether and how democratic societies need to provide adequate and legitimate spaces for the expression, contestation, and negotiation of emotions. As of now, these spaces are absent because the guardians of public discourse and political debate seem overly optimistic regarding the ideal of a "rational" public sphere. Finally, the question arises of what the contestation of emotions means for the associated conflicts and the underlying issues that are at stake. One might be tempted to assume that emotions distract parties from the actual issue, constituting a convenient but ineffective strawman debate. This, however, is a short-sighted view because it is our emotions that imbue issues with evaluative qualities—making them worthy of debate in the first place.

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