

Affect, Power and the Subject

MA seminar Philosophy (16076)
winter term 2021/22

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Time: Mondays 12-14

Room: JK 29/118

- official version -

This course assumes, with Spinoza, that affect is a modality of power. On this basis, it asks: *How is affect involved in constituting, modulating and governing subjects?* The seminar combines an affect theoretic framework in the tradition of Spinoza and Deleuze, also drawing on Foucault and Butler (among others), with work in social philosophy that focuses on the situatedness of habits, dispositions and capacities and on the ways that social domains, practices and institutions shape – often reductively or in coercive and manipulating ways – the agentive and reflective capacities of individuals. The seminar starts with an introduction to cultural affect theory more broadly, to convey a sense of the discursive universe that is subsumed under the wide scope of the term “affect”. Then there are two main parts to the course: First, we cover in some detail the Spinoza-Deleuze-Foucault strand of affect theory (before Christmas). Second, we consider work in critical phenomenology and Black studies that cover similar themes with a different orientation (January). At the end of the term, we discuss a recent forceful critique of affect theory from the vantage point of Afropessimism.

The seminar is research-oriented. We will discuss some work conducted in the Collaborative Research Center (SFB) *Affective Societies*. This syllabus outlines each session and specifies primary as well as background reading for each week. A detailed bibliography will be provided separately.

As the seminar delves into a vast landscape of literature from several disciplinary fields and different areas of philosophy, the weekly main readings are often just the tip of an iceberg. It is thus advisable that you also check out the background reading for each session, and some of the supplementary sources from the Bibliography. The seminar will try to weave a thread through the material, but it also can be advisable for students to pick their own specific area of interest and engage in-depth with just a certain subtheme.

Instructions on how to obtain “**Aktive Teilnahme**” and the full **course credits** can be found at the end of this document (page 8).

Make sure you enroll for the course on the teaching platform **Blackboard**. The official syllabus and all course readings and ‘further readings’ will be made available there.

Check the Covid-19-regulations of FU frequently (<https://www.fu-berlin.de/sites/coronavirus/>) and please make sure you arrive early enough to class in order to sign up, by scanning the QR code provided in room JK 29/118.

Introductory Sessions

1. Affect Theory

Oct 18, 2021

Session 1 – Introduction: Philosophy and Affect Theory

General introduction to the tableau of themes, questions, and problems the seminar will cover. Slaby will briefly reflect on where affect theory stands today, and give some impression of the “style” or “spirit” that prevails in discussions of affect. Several leading questions and issues pertaining to the affect-power-subject nexus will be identified and briefly discussed. The syllabus, modes of participation, tasks and exams will be outlined.

Teaser text:

M. Foucault (1977) – Preface to the English Translation of *Anti-Oedipus*

Oct 25, 2021

Session 2 – Affect Theory: Origins, Directions, Perspectives (*Cultural Studies*)

The second session will continue the introduction to the capacious field of affect theory, based on a detailed interview with one of its pioneer thinkers and practitioners, Lawrence Grossberg. Besides talking about the intellectual sources and the multiple orientations of affect theory, Grossberg champions “cultural studies” as the natural home of work on affect. Our task will be to identify key issues and questions that can help us focus the seminar and get a better sense for its topic, but also for the intangible dimensions involved in scholarship on affect.

Text:

L. Grossberg (2010) – “Affect’s Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual “ (interviewed by Melissa Gregg & Gregory Seigworth), in: Gregg, M. & Seigworth, G.J. (eds), *The Affect Theory Reader*. Duke University Press, read esp. pp. 309-332

Further reading:

B. Massumi (1995) – “The Autonomy of Affect” In: *Cultural Critique* 31, 83-110.

A. Cvetkovitch (2012) – *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Duke University Press, Introduction, 1-26.

Part I – Affect, Power and the Subject in Post-Structuralism and Affect Theory

2. Affect and Power, Basics

Nov. 1, 2021

Session 3 – Warm Up: Societies of Control and Affective Governance

This session will kick off the theoretical part of the seminar, namely the development of a perspective on affect as a force that constitutes, shapes and modulates (terms that will have to be clarified) situated human subjects. This first session will provide an initial orientation and general perspective, before we will delve deeper into the Spinoza-Deleuze-Foucault strand of recent affect theory in subsequent sessions. You will note a shift in style from the orientation towards the affective texture of everyday life, typical for cultural studies, towards a more systematic endeavor that aims to piece together a (critical) theory of affective subjectivation.

Texts:

G. Deleuze (1992) – Postscript on the Societies of Control. *October* 59, 3-7.

R. Mühlhoff (2018) – *Immersive Macht: Affekttheorie nach Spinoza und Foucault*. Frankfurt/M.: Campus, Einleitung (S. 11-28)

(alternative for those less secure in reading German: Mühlhoff & Slaby (2018) – “Immersion at Work: Affect and Power in Post-Fordist Work Cultures”. In: Röttger-Rössler, B. & Slaby, J. (eds.). *Affect in Relation – Families, Places, Technologies* (pp. 155-174). New York: Routledge.)

Nov. 08, 2021

Session 4 – Theories of Subjection/Subjectivation

This session provides a glimpse into theories of power-inflected subject-formation in the Foucault-Butler tradition. As an exemplary articulation of this strand of scholarship, we engage with Judith Butler’s 1997 book *The Psychic Life of Power*. Butler combines her own theory of performativity with elements from the views of, among others, Nietzsche, Freud, Althusser and Foucault, thereby moving the poststructuralist framework closer to approaches that center on affect. We will not be able to go very deeply into the specifics of Butler’s approach, which is a notable theoretical universe of its own kind. Rather, we will use Butler’s work to extract an understanding of subjection and subjectification (including elements of resistance involved therein), in order to come to terms with the power-subject nexus more generally. This will also allow us to begin a discussion on the notion of the “subject” in continental philosophy.

Texts:

M. Foucault (1982) – “The Subject and Power”

J. Butler (1997) – *The Psychic Life of Power*, Introduction and chapter 3 (‘Subjection, Resistance, Resignification: Between Freud and Foucault’)

Further reading:

M. Foucault (1977) – *Discipline and Punish*, chapters ‘Docile Bodies’, ‘Panoptism’, and ‘Complete and austere Institutions’

J. Butler (1997) – *The Psychic Life of Power*, chapter 4 (‘“Conscience Does Make Subjects of Us All”: Althusser’s Subjection’)

Nov. 15, 2021

Session 5 – Affect and Power in Spinoza

In this session, we approach the difficult task of familiarizing us with Spinoza’s approach to affect and power insofar as it is informing a key contemporary strand of affect theory. By necessity, this has to happen in a selective and cursory fashion. Instead of in-depth Spinoza scholarship, we will consider parts of the contemporary debate which illustrate the potency and fascination of Spinoza’s thought for today’s situation. Dorothy Kwek’s text has the additional benefit of illustrating the particular relevance of Spinoza’s affect theory for debates in political philosophy (concerning the “multitude” and approaches to radical democracy). Hasana Sharp’s chapters give a good introduction to affect’s relevance for Spinoza’s overall project, and elaborates on the important concept of “transindividuality”. In this session, it makes much sense to also spend some time with the background readings.

Texts:

D. Kwek (2015) – “Power and the multitude: A Spinozist view” *Political Theory*, 43(2), 155-184.

H. Sharp (2011) – *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*, ch. 1 (excerpt), 34-55.

Further reading:

M. Saar (2013) – *Immanenz der Macht*. Suhrkamp, 133-214.

E. Balibar (1997) – *Spinoza: From individuality to transindividuality*. Rijnsburg: Eburon.

Nov. 22, 2021

Session 6 – Spinoza and beyond: Affect and Power today

We now turn to work conducted in the FU Berlin-based collaborative research center (CRC) *Affective Societies*. Drawing on Spinoza, some of us have worked on an affect-theoretical approach to subjection in contemporary sectors and institutions of social life, such as the corporate workplace. We will use this session to assemble the currently prevalent understanding of the affect-power-subject nexus in its most basic outline. In the subsequent sessions, this understanding will be sharpened and critically discussed.

Text:

J. Slaby & R. Mühlhoff (2019), Affect. In: Slaby, J. & C. von Scheve (eds.). *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (pp. 27-41). New York: Routledge.

Additional literature tba

(we will also still draw on the texts, including the background reading, from the previous week)

3. Affective Arrangements

Nov. 29, 2021

Session 7 – Affective Arrangements

“Affective arrangement” has become a central working concept in the approach developed in the CRC *Affective Societies*. It is the specifically affect-theoretical appropriation of Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concept of *agencement* (and previously, the *desiring machine*). When developing our proposal on the affective arrangement, we tried to balance the complex conceptual background of the *agencement* with a more pragmatically oriented, open-textured concept intelligible to non-philosophers, but that is still specific enough to help us understand and precisely analyze the unique affective texture of certain affect-intensive sites of social life. The ontological understanding of affect as a dynamic relationality is thereby concretized enough to make it applicable to a microanalytic of specific domains of organized sociality (we hope...). We will be particularly interested in understanding the link between “cranky” arrangements of social life and the particular dispositions and habitual demeanor of individuals.

Texts:

J. Slaby, R. Mühlhoff, & P. Wüschner (2019) – Affective Arrangements. *Emotion Review* 11(1), 3-12
 T. Nail (2017) – “What is an Assemblage?” *SubStance* #142, 17(1), 21-37.

Further reading:

I. Buchanan (2015) – “Assemblage Theory and its Discontents.” *Deleuze Studies* 9(3), 382-392.
 J. Slaby (2019) – Affective Arrangement. In: Slaby, J. & C. von Scheve (eds.). *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (pp. 109-118). New York: Routledge.

Dec. 06, 2021

Session 8 – More Fun with Affective Arrangements

We will devote another session to the productive conceptual tangle that surrounds the *agencement*/affective arrangement. In discussion with Ian Buchanan’s helpful critical introduction to the theme, and by picking up some of the original articulation by Deleuze & Guattari and also Guattari separately, we will try to develop our own take on affective arrangements. Students are encouraged to present their own examples of affective arrangements and push the concept further

based on their own ideas and experiences. This session will be planned in part ad hoc in response to the issues raised so far in the seminar, and last session in particular. So be prepared for some last minute change of – or addition to – the required reading.

Texts:

Excerpts from I. Buchanan (2021) – *Assemblage Theory and Method*. Bloomsbury.
 F. Guattari (1995) – ‘Balancing-Sheet Program for Desiring Machines’, in *Chaosophy*, trans. R. Hurley, New York: Semiotext(e), pp. 123–50.
(further or different literature for this session will be specified later)

Dec. 13, 2021

Session 9 – Affective Subjectivation

To end the first central thematic part of the seminar, we will see the perspective at work in the analytic developed by Rainer Mühlhoff, in particular, his study of immersive work environments in the new economy. The session serves the purpose to bring the conceptual elements developed in previous weeks together and see how this is supposed to work analytically. We will specifically ask whether and to what extent Mühlhoff’s analytic might be deployed in other areas of social and institutional life as well. This will also afford us an opportunity to discuss potential limits and shortcomings of this theoretical perspective.

Text:

R. Mühlhoff (2018) – *Immersive Macht*. Kapitel 8 (Von der Normalisierung zur Kontrolle: Immersive Macht) & Kapitel 9 (Das Subjekt der Immersion)

Texts in English/further reading:

R. Mühlhoff & J. Slaby (2018) – “Immersion at Work: Affect and Power in Post-Fordist Work Cultures”. In: Röttger-Rössler, B. & Slaby, J. (eds.). *Affect in Relation – Families, Places, Technologies* (pp. 155-174). New York: Routledge.
 R. Mühlhoff & T. Schütz (2019). Immersion, Immersive Power. In: Slaby, J. & C. von Scheve (eds.). *Affective Societies: Key Concepts*. New York: Routledge.
 R. Mühlhoff (2021) – “Affective Dispositions.” Manuscript/Preprint.

Part II – *Affect, Power and the Subject in Black Studies and Critical Phenomenology*

4. Critical (Post-)Phenomenology: Fanon, Ahmed, Guenther

Jan. 3, 2022

Session 10 – A Phenomenology of Whiteness

Critical phenomenology is a burgeoning field of scholarship connecting tools from the phenomenological tradition with the repertoires of critical social philosophy, feminist theory, post-colonial studies, critical race theory and black studies. One of its icon representatives is “feminist killjoy” Sara Ahmed, whose rise to prominence began (in part) with her searing re-fashioning of Husserl’s and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology into an armory for anti-racist social analysis. A pivotal source for Ahmed is Frantz Fanon’s work on sociogenesis and on the “lived experience of the black” (1952). We will begin our engagement with critical (post-)phenomenology at this juncture where Ahmed meets Fanon, making a fresh start with our seminar topic. We will see that subjectivation is front and center here, but in a different theoretical register and with a different activist thrust than in the Foucault-Butler legacy.

Texts:

F. Fanon (1952) – *Black skin, white masks* (C. L. Markmann, trans.). New York: Pluto Press 2008; Introduction plus excerpt from chapter 5, “The Fact of Blackness”

S. Ahmed (2007) – “A phenomenology of whiteness” *Feminist Theory*, 8(2), 149-168.

S. Ahmed (2004) – *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Routledge, Introduction: The Way You Feel (pp. 1-19)

Jan. 10, 2022

Session 11 – “Seeing Like a Cop”

Afropessimist thinker Frank Wilderson III said of white people: “white people, in their very corporeality, *are* the police”. Lisa Guenther provides a phenomenological analytic of why this is so, combining ideas from Fanon and from the legal history of white supremacy to develop a critical phenomenology of “whiteness as property”. This is phenomenological subjectivation theory in full swing. Situated between contemporary phenomenology and the more radical strands of Black studies, Guenther also tries to thread the needle of finding a way to position herself in these debates as white scholar inhabiting spheres of privilege. Besides studying her complex argument, we will probe the extent to which Guenther’s work is another iteration of a theory of how power becomes subjectively “lived” via situated forms of being that are thoroughly affective.

Text:

L. Guenther (2019) – “Seeing Like A Cop: A Critical Phenomenology of Whiteness as Property” in: E.S. Lee (ed): *Race as Phenomena: Between Phenomenology and Philosophy of Race* (pp. 189-206) Rowman & Littlefield.

Further reading:

Ch. Harris (1993) – “Whiteness as Property” *Harvard Law Review* 106(8), 1709-1791.

On this afternoon at 4pm, Lisa Guenther will join my colloquium live from Canada via webex, please e-mail me one week ahead of time of you want to participate

5. Black Studies & Afro-Pessimism

Jan. 17, 2022

Session 12 – Racializing Assemblages

Alex Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus* is a helpful opinionated introduction to the philosophical gist of Black studies, and to Black feminism in particular. In his book, Weheliye claims that Foucault (on *biopolitics*) and Agamben (on *bare life*) have been unduly dominant in mainstream intellectual discussion, monopolizing scholarly attention to the detriment of their forerunners and contemporaries in the Black radical tradition, despite the fact that the Paris scene in the 1960s and 1970s took a lot of inspiration from the thinkers and activist of the Civil Rights Movement. Against the “snowy masculinist precincts of European philosophy”, Weheliye elaborates his notion of *racializing assemblages*, bringing the conceptual lineage of the *agencement* to bear on the historical production of racial difference and on the continuation of racial oppression in the present. We will pay particular attention to this transformation and radicalizing of arrangement thinking, but use the session also to familiarize us with the thought style of Black studies.

Text:

A. Weheliye (2014) – *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. Duke University Press, Introduction: Now (pp. 1-32) & ch. 3 Assemblages: Articulation (pp. 46-52)

Further reading:

H. Spillers (1987) – “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”

S. Wynter (2003) – “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom”

Jan. 24, 2022

Session 13 – Discussion session

We use this week to take a breather from the reading assignments and discuss open issues from the past three sessions. Students are encouraged to present their own thoughts, questions and critical comments on the materials so far discussed.

Jan 31, 2022

Session 14 – Afropessimism contra Affect Theory

Tyrone Palmer has jumped on the intellectual scene recently with two rigorous, not to say merciless, critiques of affect theory – taking aim at the field in its entirety, explicitly including both the Spinoza-Deleuze strand of relational affect and the (post-)phenomenological approaches as championed, for instance, by Sara Ahmed. We will focus on his more recent text “Otherwise than Blackness”, where Palmer especially engages with the conceptual tangle of world/worlding/world-making and the idea that affect promises transformative, liberating and creative potentials, offering hope even where, at present, bleak conditions of oppression, domination and inequality obtain. While specifically critical of contemporary iterations of phenomenology-informed affect studies, Palmer’s work amounts to a deconstructive attack on the integrity of the conceptual edifice of Euro-modern philosophy more broadly, so the significance of his discourse reaches much further than the precincts of affect theory.

Text:

T. Palmer (2020) – “Otherwise than Blackness: Feeling, World, Sublimation” *Qui Parle* 29(2), 247-283.

Further reading:

T. Palmer (2017) – “What Feels More than Feeling?: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect”. *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3(2), 31–56.

Feb 7, 2022

Session 15 – Affect and the Power of the Negative

We will discuss my own work in progress, a manuscript in which I respond to Palmer’s critique by suggesting a “dark” iteration of affect theory: an approach that focuses on the destructive potentials of affect as the foundation of what Fanon calls “the white world”. While I am in agreement, by and large, with Palmer’s critique of “world” and “world-making” and of the unduly optimistic tone of much work in affect theory, I disagree with the totalizing scope of Palmer’s critical attack. Drawing on Ahmed, Guenther, Weheliye and also Deleuze & Guattari, I suggest a way forward for affect theory that might be up to the task of illuminating the afterlife of slavery and the destructiveness of the Western world order. In the context of the seminar, this manuscript might help us to connect the different approaches discussed in the previous five sessions and begin a renewed discussion of “affect’s futures” outside the usual scope of academic affect theory.

Text:

J. Slaby (unpublished/2022) – “Untapped Negativity: Affect, the White World, and the Generativity of Destruction”

Feb 14, 2022

Session 16 – Final Discussion

We use the final session to assemble a comprehensive picture of what we have learned in the course, collect open and contested issues, and pose questions for future work. Recommendations for term papers are given, possible topics discussed. We also discuss the class itself and collect ideas and recommendations for future course formats, teaching styles and topics.

Course requirements

Active participation

A) Weekly discussion questions

Besides regular attendance, participants are required to pose **weekly discussion questions** or **comments** concerning each week's reading, and post it – at least ca. 26 hours before the respective session (Sunday morning) – on Blackboard (discussion board for each week). Questions or comments should concern issues to be discussed in the next session, and not exceed 250 words. Posts should be made no later than 10am on Sundays. Each participant is required to post at least in **six** of the fifteen weeks of regular course work (6! *This is not much... ;-)*)

Note on attendance: Due to the special conditions, I will likely overbook the course by about five or six participants, so I reckon with about 5 or 6 of you missing each week. When ill, stay home; when grossly demotivated, stay home; but do try to attend at least 12, better 13 of the 16 sessions.

B) Session minutes

For one session, you should team up with a fellow student and write session minutes (“Protokoll”). That is a document of maximum 2 pages lengths, fully written out (no notes!), outlining the course of our discussion: central topics covered, key questions, points of conflict, open issues etc. **Minutes should be send in no later than Friday 6pm on the week of the class.**

The six discussion questions and the one session minutes combine to qualify you for successful “active participation”. All participants have to do this in order to obtain any sort of participation certificate.

Full credits (“Modulabschluss”)

can be obtained by writing a **term paper** (15-20 pages) on a topic related to the seminar topics and texts, deadline for term papers is March 30, 2022 – send your term paper as a pdf-file to jan.slaby@fu-berlin.de (no paper copy required)

Course materials and further information on **Blackboard**; please sign up asap (password: control-society).

If you have questions about the course, do not hesitate to ask me: jan.slaby@fu-berlin.de