Feeling It/Not Feeling It: Mood Stories as Accounts of Political Intuition

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Abstract
What does it mean to speak of a society being nervous, a demos angry, a polity depressed or a population exhausted? Are these merely frothy terms of journalistic description or can such moods be captured in meaningful ways? This article responds to two tendencies: the dismissal of mood as affective blur and claims to represent mood through scales of empirical measurement. The argument presented here is that mood is a definable phenomenon, relating to perceptual confusion between objectivity and subjectivity; diffuse affective sources and cumulative sensations rather than temporally containable events. To speak of the mood of a social situation is to acknowledge this ambiguous juncture between subjective determination and objective constraint. More like background feelings that persists over time, moods frame not only immediate situational experience but scope for future thought and action. In this sense, moods frame political agency. This framing is primarily intuitive rather than conventionally cognitive.

This article explores one method for capturing the ways in which mood shapes agency. In interview-based mood stories, interviewees are invited to focus upon how the mood affect them as political actors. Mood stories are neither traditional representational narratives nor simple impressionistic portraits of feelings, but accounts of how people find meaningful ways of constituting their own experience. Mood stories aim to get at the intuitive work involved in forming political experience. The empirical context for the mood stories examined here are 42 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with British citizens aged between 18 and 80 with a view to understanding how Brexit made them feel.

Keywords Mood · Agency · Intuition · Affect · Political democracy · Subjectivity

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I have been listening to people in focus groups since the late 1980s and I cannot recall a time when the national mood was more despairing. (Deborah Mattinson, Britain Thinks, Guardian, 15.6.2019)

The result of December’s general election had a noticeable effect on the national mood. Election week saw the proportion of Brits feeling sad spike to 33%, having been at 25% the week before. Likewise, there was a spike in the number of people feeling scared, up to 17% from 11% the week before. (Matthew Smith, YouGov briefing, 2.7.20)

The above extracts are characteristic of a contemporary tendency amongst political commentators to refer to mood as an empirically observable political phenomenon that can be identified, measured and tracked over time. Where politics was once imagined to be dominated by opinions and ideologies, it is now commonly interpreted in terms of affective qualities that are projected on to social objects. To speak of the anger of the ‘left behind’; the factious nervousness of divided communities; the shame experienced by groups treated with persistent disrespect and the collective exhaustion of workforces in the face of relentless demands for deforming flexibility is to recognise that the political world is infused by pervasive mood-states that are barely registered and opaquely articulated.

As political scholars move beyond overwhelmingly cognitivist and rationalist accounts of political behaviour and attend to the affective conditions that frame it, there remains a conspicuous lack of consensus about how to describe distinctive affective phenomena. This has at times resulted in a tendency to employ concepts such as emotion and affect or mood and atmosphere with a degree of promiscuity that would be quite unacceptable in a cognitivist context. For example, few political scholars would regard terms such as opinion, attitude and interest to be transposable, whereas ‘many emotion theorists seem to find no special purpose for the term “mood”, using it interchangeably with other terms such as affect or emotion …’ (Morris, 1989: 12).

Long before mood was ever used to describe socio-political contexts, it was employed by psychologists to characterise internal, subjective states. The modern concept of mood emerged as a scientific expression of what pre-moderns had referred to as ‘spirit’ or ‘humours’. As mood came to be recognised as a distinctive notion, twentieth-century psychologists expressed some frustration at their discipline’s failure to distinguish this concept from other affective states (Nowlis, 1965; Ruckmick, 1936; Schachter, 1964; Wessman & Ricks, 1966). It was not until the 1970s that theoretically developed accounts of how moods operate at complexly intertwined emotional, cognitive and physiological levels began to emerge. Parkinson et al., (1996:9–10) definition of mood as ‘an undirected evaluative mental state which temporarily predisposes a person to act towards a wide variety of events in ways according to its affective content’ captures the key elements of current psychological thinking about the concept. Unlike emotions, which tend to be ‘caused by specific events localised in time’ (Parkinson et al., 1996:6), moods emanate from more diffuse, enigmatic sources. More like background feelings that persists over time (Thayer, 1996), moods frame not only immediate situational experience but scope for future thought and action.
This agentic connotation of mood relates psychological characterisations to earlier humanist accounts of feelings as material forces and sources of subjective intuition, such as William James’s notion of ‘total reaction’ whereby people are moved to feel and act by a ‘sense of the world’s presence’; Heidegger’s conception of Stimmgung as a permanent state of dispositional attunement and Raymond Williams’ ‘structure of feeling’ as a ‘felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time’. Whereas psychological studies have focused mainly upon the consequences of mood-states for individual agency, humanistic scholars have alluded to socialised moods which ‘make certain attachments available’ (Zhang, 2018:123), while rendering their sources unfathomable and ineffable.

Any attempt to develop an analytic sensibility towards the relationship between environmental forces and relations and subjective sensibilities and intuitions depends upon answers to a series of political questions about how mood energies circulate (some more freely than others); who gets to name them; the agentic options facing people who are ‘in a mood’ and who possesses the symbolic power to generate counter-moods. As Ben Highmore (2017:11) rightly states, ‘Moods … are not innocent and unmotivated: registering moods of fear and trepidation, of elation and expectation, nearly always takes us into the realm of the political’. If we are to think of citizens (and even governments) as being not only enmeshed in material systems, but immersed in mood-states which they must learn to recognise, interpret and act upon in specific ways, we shall require more sensitive modes of appreciation of the dynamics of political affect.

This article focuses upon one way of making sense of political moods through the critical interrogation of what I call mood stories. These are mood-inflected accounts of political reality that are narratively structured and framed by tropes that reflect distinctive ways of feeling. Mood stories focus less upon the descriptive force of narrative than its affective shaping of political intuition and agency. In the next part of the article, I aim to establish a working meaning of the term ‘mood’, paying particular attention to its political significance. I then turn to the relationship between mood and narrative, arguing that the latter is an ideal form for the expression of feelings that are inherently inchoate, impressionistic and indeterminate. Then, drawing upon interviews that I conducted shortly after the UK Brexit referendum of 2016, I work through some examples of mood stories, showing how they reveal the ways in which political situations, dilemmas and impasses are framed by affective sensibilities to historical mood. This leads me to a concluding section in which I seek to suggest that political analysts should take mood seriously as a framing impetus for intuitive agency.

**Moods as Forms of Political Meaning**

It is tempting to dismiss moods as being simply too casual and fleeting to be of any social or political significance; too lacking in decipherable meaning to be of any explanatory value. After all, being ‘in a mood’ possesses neither the status of an intellectual position nor the romance of a deep feeling. It is to be struck viscerally by an ineffable aspect of being in the world, commonly registered as ‘as disturbance,
tension, blockage, emotional trouble’ (Williams, 1977:68). Comprising more or less than words can say, moods are easily minimised as mere sensations of the over-wrought body. The neglect of mood by political scholars can be traced to a long-standing rationalist suspicion of the unruly body; a preference for abstraction as ‘an epistemological process through which the rational mind, facilitated by the terms of the Cartesian mind–body split, withdraws itself from the lively, chaotic and unpredictable energies of the sensate world in order to better understand this world from a distance’ (McCormack, 2014:165–6).

Resisting the lure of such disembodying abstraction, I propose to set out three distinctive features of mood and its relationship to political meaning. The first refers to the ways in which subjective agency becomes enmeshed in affective landscapes where people come to feel that they are ‘not in control of what seems most intensely subjective about a situation’ (Altieri, 2003:58). Mood occupies an interstitial space between the intimacy of personal experience and the arcane influences of the external environment. Leaving people unsure whether they are being swept forward by the swell or driven by the force of their own agency, moods confound volition. To speak of the mood of a social situation is to acknowledge this ambiguous juncture between subjective determination and objective constraint. It is to throw agency into a state of disorientation.

The second feature refers to the sense in which moods are responses to diffuse effects that lack legible causes. Unlike discrete emotions, which are about something in particular, moods tend to be about everything and nothing. One might be emotionally angry at a friend who has acted in bad faith, but one responds in a mood of irritability towards a world in which no-one can be trusted. Anxiety about participating in a socially significant event might be an emotional response, but feeling anxious about the capriciousness of events per se constitutes a mood. If emotion is a manifestation of object-related energy, mood is more like a surrender to a sweeping gust.

The third feature refers to the sense in which moods ‘linger, tarry, settle in, accumulate and stick around’ (Felski & Fraiman, 2012:v). As cumulative sensations rather than temporally containable events, moods force us to encounter the sensorial forms through which historical forces become available to experience, soon or long after they have transpired. For example, in her moodiest of novels, Mrs Dalloway, Virginia Woolf (1925/1992:19) describes how a grand motor car with its blinds drawn, possibly containing the monarch or Prime Minister, had passed through a central London street and induced a mood:

The car had gone, but it had left a slight ripple which flowed through glove shops and hat shops and tailors’ shops on both sides of Bond Street. For thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way … something had happened. Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematic instrument, though capable of transmitting shocks in China, could register the vibration; yet in its fulness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional … For the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound.
Each of these three features of mood has implications for the meaning of politics. While political behaviour is traditionally understood as a response to already formed objects, such as wars, rates of inflation, government strategies or public opinion data, political mood responds to phenomena that are objectively opaque, causally untraceable and temporally unstable. Evading the terms of empirically objective description or explanation, such sensory impressions only achieve form through the blur of intuition. In a mood, our attention is caught between waves of historical affect and subjective sensation.

In their brilliant analysis of how markets, as arguably the most ubiquitous and potent objects of neoliberal attention, emerge out of aggregates of dispersed subjective mood, Cetina and Brueggers’ (2000) demonstrate the extent to which political forms emanate from engagement with ‘processes and projections rather than definitive things’ (149). For traders, economists, policy-makers and consumers, markets do not exist as a structured combination of defined properties, but are conceived ‘as a lifeform that they cannot control, even though they are part of it and may influence prices at times’ (155). All that is left to market actors is to intuit the mood of this social imaginary that only exists as an outcome of countless anonymous projections.

Much of what passes for ‘economic science’ involves subjective floundering and conjecture with a view to deciphering scattered mood signals in the hope that they will provide clues to future market fluctuation (MacKenzie, 2008). Given that investments and their outcomes depend upon levels of confidence, nervousness, hesitancy and enthusiasm of unknown others, rational economic agents are forced to act upon reasonable readings of ultimately unfathomable moods. Prechter and Parker’s (2007) famous law of patterned herding, which states that ‘Social systems comprising homogeneous agents uncertain about other agents’ valuations that are critical to survival and success provide a context in which an endogenously regulated aggregation of unconscious herding impulses constitutes a pattern of social mood, which in turn motivates social actions’, is a complex formulation of the rudimentary process that most of us engage in when we encounter a crowd of strangers on a dark street at night. In recent years, scores of economic sentiment analysts have trawled Twitter in the hope of discovering predictive mood clues to market movements (Oliveira et al., 2017).

These projective accounts of market mood offer a vivid illustration of how moods generate form. To be immersed in the market is to be radically vulnerable to mood dynamics that reduce agency to a set of affective hunches and exuberant gambles. Characterised by a degree of agentic disorientation whereby nobody can ever be clear who specifically is responsible for anything that happens, economic actors and commentators often speak of ‘the markets’ acting as agents in their own right or possessing feelings describable in terms of aggregate separation from identifiable subjects. Secondly, markets are affectively diffuse, manifesting everywhere and nowhere and depending upon ripples; the source of which are untraceable and uncontrollable. The mood of the market cannot be reduced to an affective aura emanating from a pre-given object, but is a constitutive force which spawns and animates market relations. To be an actor within the market is to be enmeshed in an infinite domino game in which spatially and temporally distant moves can result in massive consequences. This sense of ambient non-specificity turns experience of the market — or of being
caught in a marketized relationship — into a feeling of being consumed by intangible currents from which there is no obvious escape. Thirdly, markets are historical accumulations of practices, procedures and ploys, encoded over long periods of time and disseminated across vast spatial distances. Markets are affectively reverbarative, both generating and encompassing feelings at the same time.

The working of the market can be represented in descriptive terms, but beyond such empirical representation lies an affective ‘horizon that … can never come into view as such’ (Pfau, 2005:10). The latter comprises the mood-inflected sense of the field and relational dynamics that constitute the relationships between economic actors. This fundamental latency of mood poses a major challenge, for if moods are both central to the creation of the meaning of objects of political attachment, while resisting discernment as non-representational enigmas, how can they be studied empirically? If the determining elements of political tonality remain stubbornly nebulous, what sort of methodological strategies might be employed to capture them?

**Capturing Mood — the Value of Mood Stories**

Much contemporary effort is devoted to capturing individual and social mood states. The most common approaches involve claims to represent affective dynamics through scales of empirical measurement and normative assessment. For example, a range of psychological technologies for tracking, measuring and even modifying real-time mood fluctuations have proliferated in the early twenty-first century. Writing about the contemporary spread of these personalised interfaces, William Davies (2017) observes how they turn their users into objects of assessment and judgement, blurring the lines between representing and disciplining experience. By placing faith in psychometric industries, apps and pop theories, people are inviting unaccountable others to tell them not only how they are really feeling, but how they should feel. They are submitting to what Davies refers to as ‘a kind of private panopticon’ in which their feelings are all too often de-socialised, leaving the user feeling responsible for what seem to be failings of due resilience.

Another popular contemporary project to capture mood is sentiment analysis. This is little more than a macro version of individual mood tracking. The metaphorical objective here is to identify a ‘social pulse’, quantifiable through the persistent data chatter of social media. By codifying the affective texture of online subjective expression in relation to particular issues or contexts, sentiment analysts claim to be able to produce representative accounts of aggregate public mood. The representative claims of sentiment analysis are open to well-rehearsed criticisms: the sentiment samples they examine are hardly typical of wider populations (Jensen & Anstead, 2013; Mellon & Prosser, 2017) and their interpretive codes for classifying the affective meanings of the elliptic online messages they study lack nuance or cultural sensitivity and are dependent upon the semantic positivism of natural language processing (Coleman et al., 2018). Indeed, as we shall see, it is not only the inadequacy of the social mood representations that are problematic, but the very aim of trying to make moods representable within an object-based schema.
Political scientists have also attempted to represent changing moods, referring to ‘policy moods’ as ‘an aggregate measure of the public’s preferences’ as expressed through opinion polls (Enns & Kelstedt, 2008). In essence, what leading proponents of this method conceptualise as mood is derived from cognitively framed responses to political attitude and preference survey questions (Bartle et al., 2020; Stimson, 2012, 2018). In seeking to compute mood as a quantitative aggregate of longitudinal data, ‘policy mood’ scholars confine themselves to those elements of public feeling that can be positively represented, completely ignoring the ineffably affective dimension of the mood states they claim to analyse.

The representational ambitions of the mood-capturing methods considered thus far are fundamentally delimiting, for they confine their object of study to descriptive quanta, missing the sense in which moods are not objective states that can be calibrated, but inflective filters through which reality conditions are postulated. Our discussion of the market as a social phenomenon that does not exist as a pre-formed object of action but is constituted through a process of nervous alignment between interdependent but uncoordinated economic actors, demonstrated the sense in which mood is not merely reactive but expressive. That is to say, the moods that we experience and the stories that we tell about our experiences are ontological: they do not just represent what is already there, but express the sensory process through which situations and relationships come to feel real.

Turning from the range of representational forms designed to capture mood, I want to propose that a valuable way of understanding how moods shape experience is to listen to the stories that people tell about how they feel about things that matter to them. I refer to these as mood stories. They are accounts of how it feels to be in the world at a particular time or place, caught up in an affective atmosphere that seems to infuse a situation or scene. They tell what it is like to be absorbed by an inscrutable ambience in which the details of emplotment are inundated by qualities of feeling. Mood-stories reveal how people come to register impersonal social forces as visceral sensations. They tell of a world that is inhabited by the teller who at the same time inhabited by the world. When people describe their experience in the form of mood stories, they struggle to find an expressive language that does justice to their sensibilities. Confused between subjective feelings, such as exhaustion, incredulity or ebullience, and a seemingly objective affective climate, the tellers of mood stories are less interested in representing empirical reality than expressing qualitative perceptions which encompass ‘an element of evaluation that is, at least in part, devoid of propositional content’ (Caracciolo, 2014:36).

Mood stories are narratives that pertain to affective states, but they are neither traditional representational narratives nor simple impressionistic portraits of feelings. Narratives have conventionally been regarded as ‘the representation of real or fictive events and situations in a time sequence’ (Prince, 1982:1), but as Margaret Somers (1994:613–14) has observed, humanistically inclined social scientists have moved beyond this idea of narrative to develop a more ontological understanding that...

… social life is itself storied and that narrative is an ontological condition of social life. Their research is showing us that stories guide action; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or
being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that "experience" is con-
stituted through narratives; that people make sense of what has happened and
is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate
these happenings within one or more narratives; and that people are guided
to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of the projections, expecta-
tions, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited reper-
toire of available social, public, and cultural narratives.

People do not have experience and then report on it in stories, but live their lives
through the stories they enact, individually and collectively. Through the discursive
formulations and interpretations of narratives, people come to perceive their identi-
ties and environments narratively, with every story about experiential reality con-
stituting an appeal to plausibility. Political stories are highly contested accounts of
reality, involving an ongoing struggle amongst competing storytellers to delineate
social experience, hence the obsessive efforts of professional political communica-
tion strategists to ‘control the narrative’.

Many of the stories that people tell about their political experience concern inten-
tions and the agency to realise or hinder particular outcomes. Political mood stories
are different. They reflect upon situations in which people find themselves attend-
ing to aspects of the world without intentionality: moments and periods in which the
world appears to act upon human agency in inchoate, confounding, non-negotiable
ways. Moods in this sense are qualities that inflect and constrain agency, not as know-
able material forces, but as sensory checks and impulsions. If political stories are
moot accounts of certain kinds of experience, particularly those pertaining to the
dynamics of power, political mood stories tell of the affective and conative options
that appear to be available within situations where the scope of attentive and reactive
action is beyond the control of subjective volition.

Unlike methods designed to represent how moods empirically impact individu-
als or collectivities, mood stories focus upon the frames and tropes through which
people account for their agency in conditions of reflexive indeterminacy. How is it
that irritability, acrimony and incivility come to feel like default responses within
certain moments of public disagreement? What is the source of the nervousness and
exhaustion that sustain surges of what feel very much like civic depression? Why
does it sometimes suddenly feel like the right moment for a just cause to have its
day? To be sure, there are material explanations for such trends, but the narratives
that people elaborate about these moments and periods commonly stray beyond the
logic of cognitive action and emerge as mood stories.

Such mood stories are rarely confined to semantic codification. The expressive
repertoire involved in telling a mood story is rich in symbolic cues. As well as
words, it comprises syntactical devices which often serve to indicate the absence
of a volitional subject or stable narrative object (Bamberg, 1997). The tone units
through which speakers structure the enunciative focus of their story offer impor-
tant clues not only to what terms mean, but how they often carry with them intense
supra-semantic intensities of feeling (Frick, 1985; Kleres, 2011; Kreckel, 1981).
Speech markers such as mumbling, stuttering and self-interruption commonly pro-
vide insights into the unsaid (Bloch, 1996; Retzinger, 1991). The temporal pace and
structure of mood storytelling commonly encapsulates the mood itself; for example, a staccato tempo can evoke a sense of overwhelmingly disordered confusion, while the expression of negative feelings such as shame or humiliation might be accompanied by choked laughter (Scheff, 1985). Mood stories depend upon non-verbal affective expression through which the body seems to be telling its own story within an unconscious somatic choreography. Indeed, much of what is most significant in the interpretation of such stories is undecipherable from verbatim transcription. When a storyteller repeatedly puts her head in her hands in response to questions and each such movement seems to convey its own responsive preamble, there is no hope of understanding what is being said by simply noting the existence of a pause between question and answer. The methodological value of a multimodal sensibility is to alert us to the mood-storyteller as a being who cannot entirely escape from the experience that she is both recalling and constructing.

I have written previously about mood stories that circulated in one British city during the 2019 UK general election campaign (Coleman & Brogden, 2020), but if there was ever a political moment in which the shaping and apprehension of agency by mood stories was both apparent and significant, it was around the UK Brexit referendum of 2016. Before and after that affectively charged exercise of popular/populist historical intervention, stories abounded, feelings gushed and agonistic narratives collided. While purportedly rationalist policy-makers found themselves reduced to the platitudinous vacuity of phrases like ‘Brexit means Brexit’, the storytellers were pumped up with affective energy and politics was subsumed by narrative overdrive.

**In the Mood for Brexit?**

While the question of whether to remain part of or leave the European Union was an argument about policy, Brexit was at the same time a cathartic episode in the history of British cultural consciousness; a long-fermented response to decades of simmering feelings that a nation has somehow slipped away from its image of itself. As the journalist Fintan O’Toole (2018:85) states,

> Brexit is about many things but one of them is the feeling that there is a much larger rot to stop, a natural order of things that it being eroded … Emotionally, Brexit is fuelled by anxiety.

To say that a momentous national decision is driven by anxiety and foreboding about the rotting away of a natural order is to register a distance between such affective motivation and the rational self-interest that political scientists often posit as the foundation of public preferences. In the run-up to the referendum politicians were accused of pandering to popular ‘gut feelings’ and in the aftermath of the result much was made of a Britain Thinks ‘Mood of the Nation’ survey which found that most British people were consumed by feelings of pessimism (Guardian, 2019). Both mass and digital media were implicated as enablers of public frenzy (Jackson et al., 2016; Zappettini & Krzyżanowski, 2019; Zelizer, 2018).
Between December 2016 and January 2018, I conducted 42 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with British citizens aged between 18 and 80 with a view to understanding how Brexit made them feel. In these interviews, I encouraged people to talk about how it felt to be thrown into a national debate about a critically important decision; to make that decision as an individual voter; to witness the result of the referendum as an aggregation of public preferences and to live within families and communities in which there were intense disagreements about the significance of the result. I first analysed these interviews narratively by attempting to interpret the themes and structures of the stories that people were telling me. In a second stage of analysis, I explored how interviewees’ stories were framed by specific sensibilities to mood. Focusing upon a range of modalities of expression, allusion and hesitation, I attempted to make sense of what Thomas Pfau (2005:7) refers to as ‘the deep-structural situatedness of individuals within history as something never actually intelligible to them in fully coherent, timely, and definitive form’. Like other attempts to gain a qualitative impression of affective responses to Brexit (Anderson et al., 2020; Moss et al., 2020), my findings are inevitably subjective and make no claim to generalisation across the UK population, except insofar as they indicate that citizens’ attunement to political mood comprised an element of political orientation that exceeds cognitive explanation.

Many interviewees spoke about feeling out of control, personally, locally, globally and in relation to the referendum itself. They cited the Brexit slogan, ‘Take Back Control’, sometimes as a code term for experiences of feeling political discounted, at others in an ironic tone, hinting at its rhetorical disingenuity. I interpreted these repeated references to control as allusions to personal and collective agency. When Emma, a 36-year-old care assistant told me that ‘Brexit, to me, is our country and us taking back control’, I was intrigued by this crowded space of agency. The country takes back control from colonising forces beyond its national sovereignty. And then, as well as the country performing this act of reclamation, there is ‘us’. What was the difference in Emma’s mind between ‘the country’ and ‘us’ — or were they identical? If the need to separate them suggested different interests or strategies, what might these be? Could there be a foreseeable moment in which the collective agent — ‘us’ — might want to take back control from ‘our country’? Lenny, a 25 year-old trainee auditor, was more sceptical in his talk of taking back control:

The pro-Leave campaign projected this idea that we were being controlled, so that was the whole thing of ‘we need to take back control’ … I think people felt that we were being manipulated in some way, and that we weren’t our own identity anymore … We need to take back control, because we used to be this power. Europeans are now controlling us. On a very primitive, basic level … I think it was a pretty basic level of ‘We want to take back control of something that we don’t even know what we’re controlling over’.

I tried to push some interviewees to explain what taking back control might entail in practice. The following exchange with Lea, a 31 year-old office cleaner, captures that process:

Me: What would have to happen for you to feel that we have taken back control?
Lea: Things put in place.
Me: What sort of things would you want to see that were different? Could you imagine some clear rules or law or policies?
Lea: Yeah, I would say in my head it’s like a rulebook, like, this is happening, this is happening, this is not happening. Something clear.

This sense of Brexit as a tidying up of existential national disorder rendered the political foreground of Brexit explicable through references to an impressionistic background of perturbing disarrangement.

A second narrative theme that emerged from the interviews was about the inherent messiness of politics. People spoke of the contagious toxicity of political disagreement and the social fragility of democratic resolutions. Stories were structured around a recurring entwinement between political commitment and consequent frustration. Sophie, a 22 year-old student who had been an intern at a fashion magazine at the time of the referendum and had voted for Brexit, describes how her mood fluctuated in the immediate aftermath of the result:

I was excited, but then I think when you hear how upset other people were about it, it kind of took a bit of a toll. You felt a bit flat, rather than excited, because it was clear that it wasn’t the whole country wanting one thing.

Asked how being thrown into the political fray around Brexit made her feel, Sophie paused and then responded in a tone that reflected a sense of uttering an unsayable truth:

I almost feel like we’re given too much choice. Choice is given to people that don’t care enough to think it through.

Will, a 30-year-old office worker, added to this narrative of frustration at what felt like undue pressure to arrive at a definitive political judgement about a matter as important as Brexit:

I just think no-one can communicate and no-one will just be honest and say ‘Actually, we’ve knackered it here, we don’t actually know what we’ve done, we’re not really sure’. No-one’s saying we’re not really sure.

The story here is one of enforced agency: of feeling encumbered by an obligation to take a position on something that one does not want to decide. Essie, a 28 year-old trainee teaching assistant, spoke of waking up to hear the result of the referendum on the radio ‘and I thought it was some kind of media stunt’. This was not untypical of narrative attempts by interviewees to remove themselves from responsibility for the result of the referendum. Lopa, a 47 year-old homeworker who had voted for Brexit without much enthusiasm seemed content to reduce herself to the role of a bewildered observer:

I’m not saying it’s bad or good, I don’t know, that’s the answer. I think we’re still not clear on what’s going to happen.

Related to these suspicions about the consequences of being dragged into politics, several of my interviewees told stories that cast doubt on the capacity of other citizens to make an intelligent decision. Rather like the third-person effect hypothesis, whereby
people over-estimate the influence of media information upon others while feeling confident that they themselves can evaluate it critically (Davison, 1983; Perloff, 1999), people told stories about how they could see through the haze of Brexit misinformation, but could not trust others to do so. Gareth, a 22-year-old barista, told me that.

I feel a lot of people’s reasons for leaving weren’t very sincere. I think they weren’t honest throughout the campaign why they were voting Leave. And I think a lot of it came down to people’s opinions of things like immigration. And I think it was all … not taboo subjects, but they wouldn’t openly talk about it. And this gave them a platform.

Later, in the same interview, Gareth’s accusations came closer to home:

My parents voted Brexit. The whole rest of my family voted to leave. And I know them. And I know for a fact that, particularly my mum, my brother and sister, they didn’t research it. They voted based off what my dad did. And my dad’s a *Daily Mail* reader.

While some stories cast doubt on the judgements of other voters, some voters felt that they themselves were being judged unfairly. Abbey, a 26-year-old shop worker was almost in tears as she spoke at length about how her long-term partner had repeatedly accused her of being a racist for voting for Brexit:

My partner did say that … ‘You’re like all the rest of them’. And I don’t think I am because, like I say, I’d never voted before. There were times when I thought, ‘actually, is this going to work? Are we better off staying in?’ But then, yeah, I kept reading on. I didn’t just listen to Boris Johnson, because he’s just one out of a lot of people. And yeah, it does insult me, because I’m not racist, I don’t see myself as a racist in that I don’t value everyone the same, because I do. It’s just my opinion, and I feel like we might be better to come out of it and see what happens. So yeah, it does insult me. I don’t think it’s fair.

And then there were others who doubted themselves:

I felt like people, including myself, didn’t really know what we were talking about. And it was too big of a decision to be made on such poor information. (Jerri, a 33-year-old nurse).

Even before turning to the ethereal qualities of mood, we can see how people were narrativizing their experience of Brexit through distinctive frames of intelligibility. The trope of control surfaced as a euphemistic proxy for political agency. There was a somewhat neurotic flavour to much of this talk about control, underlined by a sense of normative agitation and cultural disarray. Attempts to account narratively for these feelings of unsettlement were blighted by an inability to articulate the terms of proper democratic agency; it was if the capacity to make a difference could only be registered through its absence. At a broader systemic level, people described politics as an inherently unreliable, erratic and beguiling domain. Even its best outcomes seemed to be at constant risk of debasement by recalcitrant contestation. And even when interviewees felt competent to seize the democratic
moment and exercise effective agency, they could not depend upon others to act in accordance with norms of civic diligence.

Brexit narratives emerged as mood stories as they moved beyond representational accounts of object-centred relations and began to touch upon the impalpable affective stimuli and inhibitors of their tellers’ agency. In accordance with Altieri’s (2003:110) adverbial understanding of affective behaviour, I suggest that the focus of mood stories is ‘less on what agents believe about what moves them than on how they perform who they become by virtue of the attitude they have been constructing’. In this sense, mood stories capture how it feels to be alive to a sensory environment.

When I asked Sophie to tell me what she understood by the term Brexit, her response instantly captured a mood:

Mess. Mess, division, it makes me think that the country completely fell apart for a year, while everyone was deciding what they wanted to do. I was falling out with my friends over it, my family. I don’t think it was a particularly good process that we went through.

Vocal expression here took a staccato form. Quick-fire words and phrases were separated by inhaled pauses. Emphatic baton gestures gave emphasis to the frenetic delivery. Metaphors of falling evoked images of precipitous descent, the hazardous plunging of hitherto stable relationships. As she described a country falling apart and friends falling out, Sophie presented herself as an exasperated observer rather than an active agent. The ironic under-statement of the final sentence suggested that words cannot do descriptive justice to the experience of disappointment generated by Brexit. Conjured poetically, almost Biblically, this ambience of generalised mess, division and falling apart seemed to have no temporal boundaries, but was affectively reverberant, both unleashing and unleashed by unspecified forces. Sophie was not offering an historical chronicle or political analysis, but a registration of sweeping affective palpitations.

I asked James, a 34 year-old hotel chef, to tell me about how he first heard the result of the Brexit referendum. He grimaced, as if urging me to recognise the bitterness of the memory he was about to recall:

When I woke up in the morning and watched it I couldn’t believe it. I really couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe it. At the same time, I thought to myself, this is typical. I thought, I should have seen that this was going to happen.

As I listened to this answer, I sensed that James was speaking to himself more than to me. The pounding cadences of his expression of real-time disbelief were reminiscent of someone reliving a trauma. James’s disbelief was ambiguous; in part, he was recalling a cognitive resistance to the possibility of such an incongruent event as Brexit; in part, he was describing an emotional incapacity to take in news that was so disruptive to his equilibrium. But then, James’s voice changed significantly, assuming a knowing confidence as he retraced his feeling of having paid insufficient attention to the social mood leading up to the referendum. That he ‘should’ have seen Brexit coming was a reflection on his own refusal to acknowledge signs that would have prepared him for what subsequently came to him as a
shock. My question afforded James an opportunity to tell a complex mood story which involved acknowledgement of at least three affective states: incomprehension, denial and recognition.

I asked James to move forward from the moment when he heard the Brexit result to the time of our interview (January 2018). How was he feeling about Brexit now?

I don’t feel sad, I just feel a little bit ashamed, a little bit embarrassed by it, sometimes … When Brexit happened, it was a hot topic. People wanted to get into certain groups so that they could start saying their views, and everyone was agreeing with them, and it was great. But now, people don’t really know what’s going on. People have lost the interest. It’s not a social thing anymore. It’s not all over social media. And I said it before, I think people are actually bored of Brexit. They hear about Brexit on the news and think ‘Oh, they’re still talking about it.

James began his answer with a denial: he does not feel sad. His need to disavow sadness suggests a social mood characterised by confusing affective signals. What might appear to be sadness, James explained, was in fact shame and embarrassment, but only ‘a little bit’ of each, and only ‘sometimes’. One sensed that he was trying to describe a diminished mood in which powerful feelings that had once moved him had been flattened by overuse. James goes on to explain how this deflation came about. However shocking he had found the initial event, at least Brexit had been a ‘hot topic’. Its mood had been socially galvanising. But over time that mood had dissipated. Brexit had become boring — no longer ‘a social thing’. I think that James was referring here to a contrast between Brexit’s brief life as a vibrant cultural movement, absorbing all sorts of popular commitments and fantasies, and its post-referendum return to the routine aridity of politics as normal.

When I asked Aidan, a 29 year-old fitness instructor, to tell me about his memory of hearing the referendum result, he offered me a telegraphically formulated story:

Woke up with my girlfriend actually, at the time. And I was sat there, I just didn’t believe it could happen, really. That happened, and then obviously a few months later Trump happened, and I think a snowball effect started to happen. I think a lot of things happened and people didn’t expect them.

Here was an example of an account of a series of actions that appear to have no agent executing them. This is known syntactically as agency depletion. The story begins with Aidan sitting up in bed with his then girlfriend and feeling a sense of disbelief, as if suddenly exposed to a freak act of nature. And then the contingencies continue: ‘Trump happens’, which in turn triggers an avalanche of unexpected happenings. As Aidan describes these historical aberrations, he looks into the distance as if seeing before him hazy images of capricious turmoil and weirdness. According to Aidan’s mood story, events like Brexit ‘happen’ without apparent agency.

For some of my interviewees, mood served an expansive function, allowing them to stretch specific memories of Brexit to fit within a much broader affective atmosphere. When I asked Essie why she thought people became so agitated about Brexit, she referred to a tangential concern that she considered implicitly relevant to my question:
Just in the things we say now, we’ve got to be really, really careful of what we say. I think that’s had a lot to do with it. Obviously. I’m not saying about slander or anything, but there’s so many things that have changed, that we’ve lost control of. Even in schools, teachers have lost control of how they can teach groups, so students can get away with murder, literally, these days.

Essie’s account of mood exemplified what the philosopher Charles Taylor (1993: 328) means when he states that ‘Engaged agents are creatures with a background sense of things’. That is to say, unlike the idealised rationalist agent who engages only with the immediacy of interest and opportunity, engaged agents bring into play the implicit and fragmented feelings that have been gathered as vestiges of their experience. They are able to attend to unarticulated understandings of the bearings of such conditions upon their capacity and propensity to act. Essie seemed to be saying that there was a clear link in her mind, perhaps inarticulable as a logical connection, between a sense of caution in response to officially sanctioned norms regarding what can be said and Brexit as a secret vote for the prescriptively unsayable. Essie could in principle make this ‘subsidiary awareness’ (Polanyi, 1962) articulable, but even before doing so, its status as a mood resides in its pre-reflective attention to agentic possibility that is devoid of explicit intentionality.

The mood stories that I have been reflecting upon offer one way of gaining qualitative insights into the inexplicit and suggestive forms that subjective sensory appraisal take. While there are moments of acknowledgement of Brexit as an identifiable affective object, at the same time these stories register the presence of moods as elusive currents of feeling to which it is difficult to adjust and from which it is hard to escape. I have in mind here Jasper’s (2018) conceptualisation of mood and affect as points on a spectrum which slowly blur into one another. Mood stories provide a method for investigating the impulses that precede agency by exploring how intuitive assessment lays a fragile foundation for what can subsequently be known. They constitute epistemic conjectures through which actuality is apprehended through the kind of creative speculation commonly associated with intuition (Davis, 2009; Forgas, 1995).

### Mood and the Framing of Political Agency

Political statements that used to open with ‘I think that’ (or ‘believe that’) increasingly start with ‘I feel like’ (Worthen, 2016). This is not a trivial semantic shift. It marks a distinction between what can be known through reference to an apparently objective reality and what must be surmised through reference to subjective intuition. The latter emanates from experience that is yet to be formulated as meaning.

According to Dane and Pratt (2009:40), intuition describes ‘affectively charged judgements that arise through rapid, non-conscious and holistic associations’. Drawing upon Seymour Epstein’s (1994) dual-process theory of reasoning which identifies two distinctive styles of sense-making — the first experiential, tacit, associative and automatic; the second rule-based, analytic and explicit — this definition suggests that intuition is a mode of apprehending reality and solving problems that

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befits uncertain situations unsuited to object-centred analysis. Unlike objective phenomena, in which what is being observed is deemed to have a knowable reality that is independent of the observer, there are certain phenomena that have indeterminate meaning and can only be made intelligible through the interpretative perception of subjects as observers.

It would be a mistake to under-estimate the extent to which citizens — as well as politicians and policy-makers — attend to the affective potentiality of situations with a view to catching up with what is emergent within them. As intuitionists, they invest subjectively in hypotheses about social reality, working at a crucial stage of agentive processing in which action remains prospective and undetermined and the potential space of the political is still a confusing blur of affective proprioception and motivational priming.

Contemporary political scientists and commentators are intrigued and not infrequently troubled by intuitively driven political actors, worrying that they are more likely to be moved by the vagaries of nervous energy than a reliable compass of rational calculation (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015; Davies, 2018; Kinvall & Mitzen, 2020). While they are right in valuing cognitive perception and knowledge as a crucial civic resource in relation to objective observation, political life is not confined to objectively determinable circumstances. Much of what happens in the world is encountered as indescribable textures of experience rather than clear-cut phenomena. When it comes to penetrating the entangled and unsettled sentient involvements that actors have with the mood of the moment, intuition may well carry greater epistemic authority than logical cognition. To speak of public energy as being inflected by a mood of nervous uncertainty about what might happen next or of a pervasive atmosphere of mutual suspicion within families and communities or of feelings of pride, regret or shame in the aftermath of a monumental vote is to acknowledge the pivotal role of mood in the framing of political agency. This entails taking seriously not only agentic motives and mobilisers, but feelings and feelings about those feelings.

People’s political response to the mood of the world is not only a pre-cognitive source of the political, but is itself a consequence of dynamics of political positioning which frame the terms of intuition. As Harmut Rosa (2019:138) puts it, ‘Our basic relation to the world manifests itself in our answer to the question of whether we feel borne up in the world or thrown into it, whether we experience it as being fundamentally responsive or repulsive, attractive or dangerous, whether we adopt towards it a more instrumental attitude or one more sensitive to resonance and whether we develop a more pathic or overwhelmingly intentionalist orientation with respect to it’. The point here is that, just as political cognition is shaped by various forms of ideology — ways in which people establish and reproduce imaginary relationships to their material conditions of existence — political intuition is attuned to the diverse ways in which people orient themselves to their environment through affect-laden associations that possess neither discursive coherence nor representational structure (Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006; Kahneman, 2011; Mossbridge & Radin, 2018; Sinclair, 2010). This is not to say that people choose the moods that they find themselves immersed in, but that their modes of responding to the affects...
and effects of the world are potentially explicable in terms of politically distinctive intuitive orientations.

We are close here to Heidegger’s concept of *Befindlichkeit*, which refers to a sense of finding oneself amidst a context, neither outside of it as an autonomous being nor within it as an environmental sponge, but as a being-in-the-world. The sense in which finding oneself in the world amounts to a feeling of being able to act purposefully or of being thrown into a plight over which one has little control is fundamental to the experiential quality of agency. The latter depends upon whether political reality is sensed as something that assails one from without or as a domain of potential intervention and this is what makes mood so central to political experience. Even more than *what* they believe, political actors are affected by *how* they become attuned to the political reality in which they find themselves. Such attunement opens up and closes down agentic capacity, orientating the pre-agentic subject to what is politically imaginable. My argument in this article has been that capturing these moments of attunement and perplexity is best done narratively, mood stories being one, but not the only, way of getting at the affective hunches that sustain the cultural energy of politics.

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