Affective rebirth: Discursive gateways to contemporary national socialism

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Abstract
This paper engages with the growth of contemporary fascism by arguing that affect plays a key role in its discourse. Departing from an understanding of affect as integral to discourse, the paper explores how the myth of palingenesis is employed by the most prominent Swedish Nazi movement to recruit new members. A methodological combination of affective – discursive theory, detailed representational analysis, and a critical reading that buys into the representations reveals the recruitment discourse as offering an affective script of feeling angry, insulted, and ashamed, as well as courageous, proud, and hopeful. These findings offer important insights into how affective-discursive practices are employed to create gateways to radicalization and ideologically motivated violence. In order to make sense of the attractiveness of contemporary fascism, the paper concludingly argues for multifaceted readings and contemplative critical engagement with the far and extreme right.

Keywords
Affect, affective practice, critical discourse studies, emotion, extreme right, palingenesis, political affect, political discourse, political extremism, racism, recruitment discourse, representation, national socialism, Nazism, fascism

Introduction
In the global North, far-right parties are currently gaining momentum and exerting parliamentary influence in diverse countries such as the United Kingdom, Hungary, the USA, Austria, Sweden, Germany, and Denmark (Breeze, 2019; Wodak, 2015; Wodak et al., 2013; Wodak and Krzyżanowski, 2017). At the same time, extreme-right groups

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with a revolutionary agenda are becoming more visible outside the democratic institutions. Movements that are ideologically rooted in historical fascism and national socialism are on the march in Greece (Golden Dawn), Sweden and Finland (The Nordic Resistance Movement), Germany (Der Dritte Weg), Italy (Casa Pound), and Russia (The Russian Imperial Movement). Within fascism, the myth of *palingenesis*, that is “national rebirth from the ashes,” is continual and key to the motivation of political action and violence (Billig, 1978; Griffin, 1993; Mosse, 1980: ch. 9) and Richardson (2017: 278) identifies heroism as the “psychological recompense for fascist political activism.” In the important work on the language of the *Third Reich*, Klemperer (2006) also witnesses how the language of the Nazi regime had fundamental emotional impact; fascist and far-right rhetoric rely heavily on affective performative work (cf. Breeze, 2019; Chilton, 2017). Theweleit (1987, 1989), in his psychoanalysis of proto-Nazi “male fantasies,” further reveals the collective Nazi mind to be imprinted with hatred of women, fear of sexuality, and a desire for homosocial belonging, as well as a lust for ritual violence. Tellingly, Wodak (2015) describes fear as fueling the political success of the far right, whereas sociologist Miller-Idriss (2017: 163; cf. Koehler, 2014) identifies desire for male comradeship and the urge to “express anger and frustration at mainstream society” as key emotional gateways for neo-Nazi recruits.

Bearing these insights in mind, this article critically engages with the growth of contemporary fascism and national socialism by unravelling affect as it is discursively enacted in fascist propaganda. In order to approach national socialism as a contemporary ideology rather than as a phenomenon of the past, the myth of palingenesis is examined when recontextualized within the current Swedish neo-Nazi milieu (cf. Forchtner and Kølvraa, 2017; Rheindorf and Wodak, 2019; Westberg and Årman, 2019). Here, I examine how the most prominent national socialist movement in Sweden – The Nordic Resistance Movement (Nordiska Motståndsrörelsen, henceforth referred to as the NMR) – recontextualizes the myth in propaganda texts and leaflets targeting new members. The aim of the paper is to semiotically unpack this myth as a case of affective-discursive practice and thereby increase the understanding of the affective dimensions of fascist ideology and how national socialism has been discursively reinvented today. By exploring the myth as a resource of emotional appeal, the study continues the scholarly discussion on both the re-emergence of fascism and the performative power of affect in political discourse (Ahmed, 2004; Breeze, 2019; Chilton, 2017; Kølvraa, 2015; Mouffe, 2018; Salmela and von Scheve, 2018; von Scheve and Walter-Jochum, 2020; Wodak, 2015).

The article approaches affect not as prediscursive or precognitive somatic reactions, but rather as discursively enacted (Fleig and von Scheve, 2020) and as “inextricably linked with meaning-making and with the semiotic (broadly defined)” (Wetherell, 2012: 20). From this perspective, affect is understood as accomplished through intersubjectivity and subject positioning. The paper also draws on Ahmed’s (2004) work on the politics of emotions and “the emotionality of texts” when analyzing the recruitment propaganda published by the NMR. This allows for a text-oriented approach to affect and to grapple with affective positioning as it is realized through the employment of specific semiotic resources. Informed by Van Leeuwen’s (2008) framework for conducting critical discourse analysis, detailed and systematic attention will thus be paid to the semiotic
resources which the NMR utilizes to position recruits through the articulation of palingenesis. As we shall see, the NMR affectively recruits new members through a script of being angry, insulted, and ashamed, on the one hand, and proud, hopeful, and courageous on the other. These findings indicate that contemporary fascism not only profits from negative affects, but, importantly, also as nurtures “worthy” emotions that, in the literature on discourse, politics, and affect, tend to be associated with “good” ideologies (Ahmed, 2004; Mouffe, 2018; Wodak, 2015). This script, in turn, resonates with the emotional appeals in historical national socialism (Griffin, 2008b) but also a common appeal in diverse social, political, and religious movements. Together, these findings offer complementary insights into the potential attractiveness of the contemporary extreme right and the affective mechanisms involved in the complex process of political radicalization (Griffin, 2008a, 2008b; Koehler, 2014; Lucassen and Lubbers, 2012; Miller-Idriss, 2017; Rydgren, 2007; Simi et al., 2013; Theweleit, 1987, 1989).

The next section outlines the particular ideological context and the role of palingenesis in relation to the NMR, followed by an introduction to the dataset. Thereafter, the analytical framework and concepts are elaborated, followed by the results and a concluding discussion.

**Palingenesis and the case of Swedish national socialism**

In his seminal work on fascism, Griffin (1993) delaminates it as “a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultra-nationalism.” From this perspective, fascism ultimately aims to rebuild the nation and to save its people and the presumed race from a supposed imminent collapse and threat. The term *palingenesis* means “rebirth from the ashes” (Richardson, 2017: 28), which highlights the perceived urge for a revolutionary overthrow of the social system that is regarded as the threat against “our nation and race.” Such ultra-nationalist scapegoating motivates lethal and mass violence for fascists; in order for the utopia become real, the current system must disappear. In a scrutiny of British fascism, Richardson (2017: 277–278) characterizes fascist discourse as follows:

> ...extremely heightened, almost apocalyptical. Britain (and/or the West, Civilisation, the White Race, the World etc) faces dire threat, and only through the steely determination of the (White) Nationalist can disaster be averted. It is always almost-too-late, the last chance, the verge of collapse—and, equally and simultaneously, it is always the new dawn, the last push, the final battle.

Such a Phoenix-like urge for regeneration applies to the contemporary Scandinavian fascist milieu and to the Nordic Resistance Movement in particular (cf. Lööw, 2015). According to *Expo*, the NMR aims to bring the democracies of Scandinavia down and to establish a new national socialist and racially-confined leader state.

Since 2016, the NMR has been the most influential national socialist organization in Sweden and has continually increased its public presence and activism. The movement was founded as a conglomerate of different extreme and radical fascist movements in the 1990s (Lööw, 2015; Expo). It was originally called The Swedish Resistance Movement (*Svenska Motståndsrörelsen*) in 1997 but was renamed in 2016 due to a strategic
restructuring of the Scandinavian radical-right community. The movement explicitly roots its ideology in fascist principles and holds Hitler as an ideological figurehead. In terms of organization and political activism, it takes its inspiration from the Romanian fascist movement the Iron Guard of the 1930s.

In contrast to other European countries such as Austria and Germany, where prohibition laws prevent Nazi movements from proclaiming their ideology publicly, the Swedish freedom of speech law allows the NMR to express its beliefs. Thus, the Swedish authorities regularly grant the NMR permission to organize public meetings and partake in public political events. The NMR frequently organizes marches and protests in connection with public events, which are given close attention by the media. The NMR’s events are highly provocative and often result in violent disturbance. The movement also actively works on recruitment and propaganda activism and has, for example, targeted secondary schools in offensive recruitment campaigns.

With regards to national rebirth, the NMR sees itself as the spearhead of an upcoming Nazi revolution and as the future leaders of a utopian Scandinavian leader state. According to Expo, the NMR describes Semitism, immigration, capitalism, feminism, communism, LBTP movements, and multiculturalism as its main ideological enemies. These groups and movements are positioned as both the cause and symptom of the perceived collapse and threat to the Nordic people and race, and the myth of palingenesis is used to legitimize these groups as targets for ideologically-motivated violence. Violence is constitutive of fascist ideology (Lööw, 2015; Richardson, 2017) and the NMR proudly reports about its members being convicted of different acts of violence on its website (nordfront.se).

Although the myth of palingenesis plays a key role for the NMR’s ideological mobilization, it is insufficient from a discourse analytical perspective for merely confirming that the myth operates as a node in fascist ideology (Richardson, 2017). With the intention of treating fascism as a contemporary ideology, the first step towards critical analysis is to reflect upon how national rebirth is interpreted in different strands of modern fascist discourse. Thus, the critical impetus is here illuminatory and the article undertakes to critically describe and explore (cf. Spitzmüller and Warnke, 2011) how the myth of national rebirth is taken to mean in recruitment propaganda (for a thought-provoking discussion regarding the critical study of extremist groups and the NMR in particular, see Askanius, 2019). As noted by Miller-Idriss (2017: 30), engagement in far-right extremist movements is enforced by messages “that invoke a sense of national or ethnic destiny, of an awakening and renewal, a rebirth, the dawning of a new era or a new world order.” Such appeals are conspicuous in the NMR’s recruitment texts and in order to illuminate this phenomenon, the NMR’s propaganda will be analyzed with regards to the affective work it performs.

The dataset under investigation constitutes leaflets distributed in public, as well as the NMR’s own handbook. The handbook can be bought at the NMR’s web shop and is promoted as a text that is “not only for activists of the NMR, but also to active party members and to all who can actively be associated with the organization regardless of individual level of engagement.”² Whereas the leaflets primarily fulfill the communicative task of attracting new members (and also confronting ideological opponents), the handbook provides a guide on how to live and embody national socialism in every aspect
of life (see Westberg and Årman, 2019). The handbook further thematizes leaflet distribution and states that “Every citizen in Scandinavia, regardless of whether they sympathize or not, should receive leaflets on a regular basis” (p. 41) and also that leaflets should be strategically distributed in areas and to individuals who have expressed sympathy for the NMR. Here, attention is paid to the introductory section of the handbook (henceforth referred to as HB), which targets new members and comprises two sections: “Your Background and Future” (Din bakgrund och framtid) and “Preface” (Förord). In addition, two leaflets entitled “The Revolution Starts with You” (Revolutionen börjar med dig) and “Sweden for the Swedes” (Sverige åt svenskarna) (henceforth referred to as REV and SWE) are included. The leaflets were distributed in 2019 and there are several reports on distribution activities on the NMR’s website. Before systematic attention is given to the dataset, the analytical framework will be explicated.

**Analytical framework: Affect, representation and critique**

In order to explore the performative role of palingenesis in the dataset, the study aligns with the burgeoning field of affective-discursive studies. The field is sustained by a shared research interest in the imbrication of language/semiotics, social life, and emotions (for instance, see Breeze, 2019; Chilton, 2017; Döveling et al., 2011; Franzén et al., 2020; Glapka, 2019; Kiesling, 2018; Milani, 2018; Nissi and Dlaske, 2019).

Affect and emotions are not novel phenomena in political discourse (Fleig and von Scheve, 2020: 2–3), and although appeals to emotions have long been considered in rhetoric studies of pathos, until recently, critical discourse studies as a field has, by and large, neglected affect and emotionality in favor of demystifying social change, ideologies, discrimination, and irrational argumentation (cf. Breeze, 2019; Forchtner, 2011; Nissi and Dlaske, 2019; cf. Fleig and von Scheve, 2020). One explanation for this is that the overall “turn to affect” has emphasized embodied experiences and feelings and made a distinction between discourse and prediscourse. Accordingly, this distinction has involved a distancing away from discourse. As Wetherell (2012: 19) puts it: “For many people working within cultural studies […] it sometimes seems that what is most exciting about affect is that it is not discourse.” However, this paper has no intention of epistemologically separating discourse from affect as psychological reactions or somatic reflexes. Nor will the article distinguish between affect as prediscursive reactions and emotions as a cultural/discursive interpretation of such reactions. Further, since ideologies and discourses are often powerful simply because they appeal to emotions and affective reactions rather than a rational exchange of ideas and arguments (Döveling et al., 2011; Fleig and von Scheve, 2020), it appears to be fair to criticize the hitherto neglect of affect in critical discourse studies to render underspecified knowledge regarding the power of discourse (Spitzmüller and Warnke, 2011: 79). Thus, this paper fully aligns with the perspective on human affect as being entangled in and semiotically enacted through discourse and communication, although without challenging any of the somatic or psychological aspects of political affect (cf. Protevi, 2009). Accordingly, Fleig and von Scheve (2020: 3) contend that there are no discourses “that can be conceived of as ‘affect free’.” This argument is supported by the work of Wetherell (2012, 2013), which calls for a discursive and practice-oriented understanding of affect.
From a practice-approach, language and semiotics are perceived of as integral to action, which “always bears a bodily and thus affective dimension” (Fleig and von Scheve, 2020: 6). Along similar lines, Ahmed (2004) calls for emotions to be considered with regard to their performatory power to do things (cf. Årman, 2020). This call will be answered here by studying how the NMR’s articulation of palingenesis interpellates (Althusser, 1971) potential recruits and how appeals to emotions contribute to the “politicization of subjects” (Ahmed, 2004: 171). According to Ahmed (2004: 12), emotions are performative through their ability to invite and position subjects; discourses provide emotional scripts and subjects can become the emotional you of a discourse if they accept the invitation to align with the moral framework that constitutes the discourse. Informed by this perspective, this study focuses on how recruitment discourse within a particular fascist context enables certain affective ways of being, that is, subject positions. In doing so, the affective subject positions are treated as potentials that might be picked up by those people targeted by the NMR’s propaganda. In order to identify these positions, and in line with the descriptive critique that has been undertaken, I strategically choose to “read with” the texts and to align with their representational perspective rather than confrontationally read “against” the texts for being ideologically problematic (Janks, 2010). Such a reading favors engagement as opposed to estrangement and makes it possible to generate a critical understanding of the attractiveness of contemporary fascism and its world view. Thus, contemplation rather than critical evaluation is the endpoint of the analysis (cf. Milani, 2015).

In order to extract these positions, Van Leeuwen’s (2008) framework for analyzing discourse as a representation of social practice has been applied. In relation to the articulation of palingenesis, the analysis will elucidate how potential recruits and other actors (primarily scapegoats) are represented, the eligibility conditions they are ascribed and what actions they are represented as being engaged in (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 7–12). Although recent studies have revealed how the ideal subject of contemporary fascism often is multimodally envisaged (Forchtner and Kølvraa, 2017; Kølvraa and Forchtner, 2019; Miller-Idriss, 2017; Westberg and Årman, 2019), the dataset under investigation primarily consists of written text. Detailed and systematic attention will accordingly be paid to the linguistic resources employed to represent palingenesis in the recruitment propaganda, although socio-semantic rather than grammatical categories are applied. As Van Leeuwen (2008: 23–24) argues, sociological meanings (e.g. agency) do not necessarily overlap with neat linguistic categories (e.g. the grammatical role of agent) but can be realized in different ways (e.g. using possessive pronouns). The methodological combination of affective-discursive theory, a solid framework for analyzing the representation of social practice and a critical reading perspective that explicitly aligns with the representations, allows the affective subject positions afforded by the recruitment propaganda to be extracted. In the next section, the results are presented.

Affective recruitment

The results are structured with respect to the unfolding of palingenesis. The recruitment texts were initially analyzed separately and, representative-wise, clause by clause. However, evidence of the myth has been reconstructed on the basis of similar representations.
paraphrased in the texts and, below, fragments from different texts have been compiled to illustrate the unfolding of the myth. Firstly, representations of the imminent collapse and threat are analyzed, followed by representations of the new dawn. Overall, the results are presented with regards to the afforded affective ways of being.

**On the verge of collapse: Feeling angry, insulted, and ashamed**

Within the recruitment propaganda, the trope of collapse and societal chaos is salient. The texts represent the nation as being under attack and as fundamentally threatened by enemies and traitors of the people. The myth is used as a springboard for attracting potential recruits and the texts paint a society on the verge of collapse. In this respect, a representational pattern emerges. Practice participants associated with the you who is being addressed are represented as goals of certain material actions (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 32, 59), in particular actions of violence and hatred, for example, “rape,” “humiliate,” “assault,” “mock,” “colonize,” “degrade,” and “intimidate.” Such actions tend to be represented as passive and as deagentilized (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 66), that is, with no agent. This pattern is illustrated in (1) to (6), in which the nation and the you who is being addressed is positioned as hated, threatened and victimized, whereas the deagentilized “horde of race strangers” is represented as hateful.

1. Your daughters, mothers and sisters are constantly being raped and humiliated. (REV)
2. Your sons, fathers and brothers are being assaulted and mocked on a daily basis. (REV)
3. Drugs are being spread to our children. (REV)
4. Gangs of strangers are taking over our city centers. (REV)
5. What do members of a people do when their country is being colonized by a never-ending horde of race strangers? (SWE)
6. Swedish culture and healthy values are being openly intimidated, mocked and degraded. (SWE)

The represented actions are semantically clustered as immoral and hateful and are aimed at “you,” “your country and family,” and “our children” or at “the people and their nation” (cf. van Dijk, 1992). The actions are also specified in terms of performance mode: they are performed “constantly” (1), “daily” (2), and “openly” (3). This emphasizes the imminence of the collapse. In particular (1) to (4), illustrate how “you” is positioned as endangered and as goal of threatening actions. By buying into these representations, the ideal reader is positioned as a victim, and as affectively insulted by and angry about the striking inequity (cf. Ahmed, 2004: 43). Also, throughout the dataset, the representations are continuously coarticulated with discourse keywords that signal a salient intertextual provenance in Nazi discourse. Here, the nominal groups “race strangers” and “people traitors” echo national socialism (see Klemperer, 2006).

Furthermore, the recruitment propaganda thematizes the responsibility for the imminent inequity. In this respect, another representational pattern emerges. Societal institutions and the current societal system are held accountable for the perceived threat and
victimization of the people and you who is being addressed. This is semiotically enacted through agentilized material actions (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 66) which explicate the responsibility for the collapse: “silences,” “is part of the attack,” “cheer,” “maximize,” “is controlled by,” “working,” “are one of the actors.” Even if (12) does not include any material action, the representation of politicians as “people traitors” and “the enemy” suggests actions of betrayal and hostility.

7. The media silences the reality since they are a part of the attack. (REV)
8. Celebrities and corporate leaders cheer the perdition in order to maximize their profits. (REV)
9. What do we do when the media is completely controlled by people hostile elements? (SWE)
10. The state and the people are no longer one, and the state is controlled by enemies of the people and the people are on the verge of the abyss and are separated from institutional power. (SWE)
11. All government institutions are working on the side of the enemy of the people against the Swedish people. (SWE)
12. What should the people do when the government comprises people traitors and the enemy? (SWE)
13. Corrupt politicians are one of the actors in the game. (REV)

In terms of actors and agency, “media,” “enemies of the people,” “all governmental institutions,” “celebrities and corporate leaders,” “people hostile elements,” and “people traitors and the enemy” are represented as agentive. This representational pattern taps into right-wing populist rhetoric and antagonistic conceptualizations of the people as being separated from the “elite up there” (cf. Wodak, 2017). This becomes particularly clear in (7) to (12), in which the NMR makes emotional sense and politicizes mainstream politicians as traitors working on behalf of the enemy rather than on behalf of the people, but also in (13), in which representatives of the current political system are ascribed the eligibility condition of being “corrupt.”

Together, these examples illustrate how the texts position public authorities and institutions as being alienated from the people and from reality which, in turn, interpellates the reader as being affectively disappointed and angry. Disappointment and anger are closely related affects and, in the dataset, disappointment augments anger as when public institutions are represented as betraying their promise and call to serve the people of the nation (cf. Ahmed, 2004: 220–221). Thus, the analysis captures how anger and frustration at mainstream society are linguistically enacted as emotional appeals in neo-Nazi propaganda. The results also suggest how the positioning of the reader as angry and disappointed fulfills performative work by offering the reader to become a part of a betrayed and inclusive “we.” As Griffin (2008b: 79) points out, affective invitations to distress and despair were also crucial in the propaganda that preceded the parliamentary success of the NSDAP at the end of the 1920s. In the dataset, however, a crucial part of the articulation of palingenesis further revolves around representing “you” as being part
of the current problem, which engenders an ashamed position. This pattern is illustrated in (14) to (17) and (18) to (20).

14. One laughs at you all over the world. The feminized, so-called, man who without resistance lets himself be run over and the brainwashed Swedish, so-called, woman who opens her bosom to her own obliteration. (REV)

15. It is your passivity that makes this possible. Why don’t you do something about it? (REV)

16. It is you who is allowing this to happen. Why don’t you act? (REV)

17. It’s up to you to draw the line. So why don’t you do it? (REV)

Initially in (14), “you” is represented as the phenomena of the mocking reaction (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 56ff) “laughs at,” that is as an object of ridicule. Further, in (15) to (17), “you” and “your passivity” are represented as being accountable and responsible for “it” and “that,” i.e. the societal morass and decline specified in (1) to (6). In addition, you who is being addressed is patronized with gendered eligibility conditions (“feminized,” “so-called man,” and “the brainwashed Swedish, so-called woman”).

The you who is being addressed is further represented as an actor in material actions (“lets himself”; “opens her bosom . . .”), as well as in facilitating actions (“makes possible,” “is allowing”), which contributes to representing the reader as being part of the problem (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 115). These representations are followed by questions, which implicitly command the reader to “act.” The reader is thereby positioned as not acting and is therefore like an accomplice in the ongoing collapse. Reading with these representations indicates a subject position that acknowledges and confesses his or her wrongdoings and, based on the confession, chooses to answer the call for action. This pattern also recurs in the handbook, in which the ideal “you” is represented as being part of the decline and threat against the national socialist utopia, see (18) to (20). The introductory sections of the handbook revolve around the vital choice that lies ahead for every aspiring member of the NMR: to continue being part of the problem or join the movement and become part of the solution.

18. We expect [. . .] you to leave your potentially decadent and comfortable life behind and start acting as befits a struggling national socialist man or woman. (HB)

19. The person reading this handbook and considering affiliating as an activist faces a fundamental choice. A life in which you either deceive yourself and continue to live in comfort or an honest and straight-backed life of struggle! (HB)

20. Do we remain as passive bystanders when racial hybridization, degeneration and common decline are spreading like a plague in the decomposing welfare state? (HB)

Here, the current and pre-revolutionary life of the reader is evaluated by being ascribed eligibility conditions (“decadent”; “comfortable”; “comfort”; “passive”), as well as specific actions (“deceive yourself”). These representations contrast the qualifications stated as being eligible for qualifying in the role as a member of the NMR (“honest”; “straight-backed”; “a life of struggle”). The performatory power of these representations hinges on
the positioning of the reader as someone who shares a common belief of what is unjust. The ideal reader is thus positioned as someone who confesses to being part of the problem and who acknowledges that his/her lifestyle augments the imminent societal collapse and obstructs the new dawn. In terms of affect, the recruit is thereby positioned as being ashamed and regretful, since the act of acknowledging wrongdoings “means to enter into shame; the ‘we’ is shamed by its recognition that it has committed ‘acts and omissions’ that have caused pain, hurt and loss to [ . . . ] others” (Ahmed, 2004: 101). By being positioned as someone who has caused pain and hurt to the people and the nation, the reader is affectively recruited as part of a “we” with a common moral framework. Bearing these observations in mind, the next section leaves the verge and enters into the new dawn.

**The new dawn: Feeling courageous, proud, and hopeful**

In the texts, the myth of palingenesis develops from the trope of chaos to the trope of the new dawn. This shift of focus involves a representational reorientation that affords an affective script of courage, pride, and, ultimately, hope. This script is accomplished by regimenting the actions and eligibility conditions with which a potential recruit has to aligned with in order to qualify as a legitimate member of the NMR. In the dataset, the practice of living a life as an NMR activist is contrasted with that of living an ordinary life in mainstream society. In relation to the trope of the new dawn, you who is being addressed is represented as an agent of fearsome actions, that is “the will to sacrifice” (21; 22); “risk-taking” (21); “struggle” (21; 22; 24); “walk through hell” (23); and “fight” (23; 25). Furthermore, the goals of the actions are of representational importance; for example, in (25), fighting against forces “which with full energy work for the extermination of our people” implies bravery. Thus, a reader who answers the call for action is affectively positioned as fearless and courageous.

21. The resistance movement will demand certain things from you and expects results. You can therefore say goodbye to a normal and safe life and instead welcome your new life, which entails an amount of risk taking and demands the will to sacrifice—a life of struggle. (HB)

22. We assume you know what you have embarked on. The struggle is here and now, and no struggle can be pursued without sacrifice. (HB)

23. Dark times may lie ahead of us, but if the only way forward is through hell then, yes, we have to pave that way and fight everything than blocks our way. (HB)

24. Now it is the North that is occupied, and the survival of our people is at stake. The struggle can no longer be fought by spear and axe—but the call for struggle is the same and the possibility of answering the call or being a coward is the same choice now as it was then [historical reference to the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest]. (HB)

25. The national forces must regain the initiative and actively fight the forces which with full energy work for the extermination of our people. (SWE)

The affective script of feeling fearless and courageous is again augmented through representational contrast. The practice of not aligning with the NMR is represented as
“normal” and “safe” (21), and participants of mainstream society are classified (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 42) as being “cowards” (24). These representations implicitly assume that participants of the NMR are the opposite, that is, abnormal, unsafe, and brave which, in turn, echoes a generic trope of (masculine) heroism (Andersson, 2008; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). Related to this, Kølvraa (2019) observes how the NMR emotionally charges its ideology with values of hyper-masculinity by recontextualizing the Scandinavian Viking heritage. The trope of the brave, masculine fascist, in turn, taps into a larger ideological narrative about being part of the heroic few who are destined to save the nation (Miller-Idriss, 2017; Richardson, 2017), while simultaneously echoing the LTI’s explicit emphasis on bravery in its praise of acts of bellicose combat (Klemperer, 2006). Along a similar note, Kershaw (1987) observes how the success of NSDAP was fundamentally linked to the propagandistic myth of Hitler as an heroic leader and incarnation of virtuous courage and manliness. Thus, the performative power of this script lies in offering the reader a chance to become part of a heroic and historical, continual “we” and to share a sense of belonging and loyalty, which is demarcated in contrast to a cowardly and normal society.

Besides being brave, the ideal reader is further prompted to affectively resolve the aforementioned shame. By joining the NMR and becoming part of a revolutionary “we,” the reader is offered a way of realizing the ideals that define the wrongdoings associated with a “normal” life in mainstream society. This offer involves an affective rebirth for the reader that coincides with representations of national salvation. In terms of representation, (26) to (29) illustrate how “you” is represented as an agent of actions that allows for the myth of palingenesis to become reality. Specifically, “you” appears as an actor in material actions that facilitate (cf. Van Leeuwen, 2008: 114–115) the prevention of societal decline and the survival of the nation, the race and the people. In (26), for example, the act of picking the revolutionary fight is represented as a means (“thereby”) of securing “freedom, security and national community [‘volksgemeinschaft’]” for future generations. In (27), “active acting” (i.e. an action and performance mode that contrasts the “passivity” of a normal life) is represented as a means of saving “our racial group” from extermination. The pattern also recurs in (28), in which the “destiny of our entire race” is represented as conditioned by “you” and “your” decision to join the NMR. Thus, the act of recruitment is ascribed the purpose of saving the race and the nation from collapsing. Also, the decision is characterized as irrational and foolish, yet “the fool” (i.e. the recruit) is classified (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 42) as being “proud, honest, unselfish and heroic” (28). Finally, in (29), the offer to become part of the solution also involves an overt invitation to become part of an ideological “we.” The reader is once again categorized, although on this occasion with reference to the function (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 42) he/she will fulfill as being part of the revolutionary “spearhead.”

26. All ethnic Swedes need to pick the fight for the reconquering of Sweden and thereby give future generations of Swedish sons and daughters access to freedom, security and national community [‘volksgemeinschaft’] in their own country.

27. Only active acting can save our racial group from the extermination our enemy wants. (SWE)
28. On the negative side of the scale pan is namely [sic] responsibility, sacrifice, risks, stigmatization and hard work. In other words, blood, sweat and tears. From a strictly rational and individualistic perspective it is this only a fool chooses the way of struggle. However, the fool is a proud and honest person, unselfish and heroic and the destiny of our entire race will ultimately be determined by how many choose this path. If you choose this path! (HB)

29. As an activist in the Resistance Movement, you are part of the national socialist spearhead. (HB)

To summarize, the potential recruit is called upon to leave a shameful normal life and to enter a proud life of bravery. As Ahmed (2004) teaches us, pride and shame are fundamentally related. Feeling pride involves a realization of the ideals that define the faults and errors that cause us to feel ashamed. Shame, Ahmed (2004: 109) further explicates, “collapses the ‘I’ with the ‘we’ in the failure to transform the social ideal into action, a failure which, when witnessed, confirms the ideal, and makes possible a return to pride.” In the current case, the return to pride depends on the positioning of the reader as someone who confesses to being part of the imminent chaos and decline. Thus, the enactment of shame interpellates the “you” to merge with continual fascist ideals as a means of returning to pride. This return involves correcting wrongdoings by defending the survival of the nation, the people and the race.

However, the unfolding of palingenesis not only involves a reorientation from shame to pride, but also a gateway out of being angry, disappointed, and insulted. As the analysis has revealed, the actions and eligibility conditions of the potential recruit are represented as necessary for the myth of palingenesis to become reality. This representational pattern also imbues the ideal reader with hope, given that hope “is what allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable” (Ahmed, 2004: 184). As Anderson (2006: 747) has noted, hope is “entangled in the circulation, and displacement, of other affects and emotions,” and in the current propaganda, the positioning of the reader as hopeful hinges on the transition between other affects. Bloch (1998: 341) further states that hope “dwells in the region of the not-yet,” and in the dataset, the recruit is temporarily positioned in “the moment of hope” (Ahmed, 2004: 184), and thus is interpellated to act promptly rather than to merely wait for the future to arrive. Griffin (2008b: 79) also emphasized the performatory power of hope and the promise of freedom from “crushing humiliation, poverty, and impotence” as being fundamentally important to the success of the Nazi regime. Ultimately, this elucidates the performative role that is played by the affective script offered in the studied propaganda. It compels and politicizes the reader to partake in national socialist revolution by construing hope as being inherently embodied in the actions of the reader.

Concluding remarks

This paper has engaged with the growth of contemporary fascism by arguing that affect plays a key role in its recruitment propaganda. Departing from an understanding of affect as integral to discourse, the analysis has explored how the myth of palingenesis is employed by the most prominent Swedish Nazi movement to recruit new members. A
methodological combination of affective-discursive theory, detailed representational analysis and a critical reading that buys into the representations has revealed the recruitment discourse as offering an affective script of feeling angry, insulted, and ashamed, as well as courageous, proud, and hopeful. It has been shown how affect exerts performatory power and politicizes the ideal reader as both a victim of and an accomplice to the presumed imminent collapse. Yet by aligning with the representational perspective of the propaganda, the ideal reader is also interpellated as someone who confesses his/her wrongdoings and who is willing to improve, and, by joining the NMR, the reader is invited to become a hero of the new dawn. Ultimately, the ideal reader is politicized as an embodied incarnation of hope.

The results confirm previous observations of affective appeals to fear, anger, and frustration within far- and extreme-right discourse (Breeze, 2019; Chilton, 2017; Miller-Idriss, 2017; Theweleit, 1987, 1989; Wodak, 2017). Yet, by reading with as opposed to against the representations, a picture emerges that supplements the understanding of affect in political extreme-right discourse. Characterizing contemporary fascist discourse as “only” revolving around hate and rage would be reductionist, given the crucial performative work that is fulfilled by pride, hope and bravery. The validity of this argument becomes even more salient when considering the interdiscursivity between the NMR’s propaganda and historical Nazi discourse. The emphasis on hope and bravery and the promise of freedom from despair and chaos actually established an emotional alacrity, which paved the way for the NSDAP’s parliamentary takeover in Germany (Griffin, 2008b; Kershaw, 1987). Thus, the NMR’s recruitment propaganda would appear to be interdiscursively linked with the affective-discursive practices of historical Nazism.

This, in turn, raises an epistemological concern with regards to the critical study of affect, politics and discourse. Within cultural and discourse studies on politics and affect, “morally good” affects tend to be ascribed to “good” ideologies, whereas “morally bad” affects tend to be emphasized in the analysis of “bad” ideologies. Tellingly, Ahmed (2004) thematizes hope as being integral to feminism and fear and hate as being integral to nationalism and racism (see also Mouffe, 2018; Wodak, 2015). Without refuting the empirical accuracy of such observations, the present study still calls for a problematization of the role of affect in political discourse.

Firstly, the affective script prompted by the NMR resonates with those affects offered by other political, social and religious movements. When the NMR calls for individual conversion by shaming recruits as a means of returning to both hope and pride, it echoes how subjects are interpellated in diverse movements such as vegetarianism, eco-activism, AA communities, feminism and left-wing activism. The confession of previous wrongdoings (e.g. meat consumption, flying, alcoholism, acting misogynistically, partaking in mass consumerism) is what allows a return to a position of rebirth and pride, while the call for action simultaneously allows the subject to embody hope (cf. Foucault, 1997). Even though the extremely heightened style of the NMR’s discourse, together with its explicit call for violence, separates it as radically different from other social and political movements, the performative power and attractiveness of the current fascist script is nevertheless reinforced by transtextual, affective recognition.

Secondly, the results highlight the importance of not building affective-ideological typologies. Rather, what appears to be fundamentally crucial to the critical study of affect
in political discourse is to approach the positioning power of affect with an open, analytical mind. In order to not repeat what we already know (that fascist discourse is ideologically problematic and dangerous), or to reduce contemporary Nazism to an ideology that only nurtures affects such as hate or fear, we need a methodology that pushes the analysis a step further. I argue that sensitizing the analysis to the workings of affect and acknowledging emotions such as pride, hope or even love as being pivotal to the performative force of fascist discourse will permit a more multifaceted reading and a more productive critical engagement.

In terms of methodology, the paper can be read as an explorative attempt to operationalize the somewhat vague concept of “emotionality of texts,” particularly for discourse analytics, which predominantly works with the semiotic analysis of texts. However, as has become clear, affect is not only a matter of representation, but always emerges inter-subjectively. This suggests that a representational analysis can never reveal affective potential on its own but requires an application that aligns with an interpretative framework. Other scripts appear when aligning with different interpretative positions, and, for example, by aligning with the position of a reluctant recipient of the NMR’s propaganda, the representations of palingenesis might instead evoke affects of being afraid or provoked (cf. Kølvraa, 2015).

In an age when the political landscape is imprinted by far right and nationalist parties and when fascist movements are on the march, there is an urgent need for an increased critical understanding of the appeal of these ideologies. As has been elucidated here, the combination of affect theory and representational analysis can provide one way of achieving this.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank professor Charlotta Seiler Brylla and doctoral student Henning Årman for their insightful comments and important feedback on the earlier versions of this paper.

**Declaration of conflicting interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Notes**

1. Expo is a Swedish anti-racist foundation and magazine, working to counter racist ideas and organizations. The references are based on communication with their researchers and at https://expo.se/fakta/wiki/nordiska-motstandståndsrörelsen
2. https://greenpilled.com/

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