

or seeing that have eluded scrutiny. And as in all cases of political divination, *Conspiracy/Theory* is about the satisfactions to be found in connecting the dots.

The Age of Discontent: Populism, Extremism, and Conspiracy Theories in Contemporary Democracies.

By Matthew Rhodes-Purdy, Rachel Navarre, and Stephen Utych. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. 307p. \$34.99 paper.
doi:10.1017/S1537592724001580

— Joseph Masco, *University of Chicago*
jmasco@uchicago.edu

— Lisa Wedeen , *University of Chicago*
lwedeen@uchicago.edu

In *The Age of Discontent: Populism, Extremism, and Conspiracy Theories in Contemporary Democracies*, Matthew Rhodes-Purdy, Rachel Navarre, and Stephen Utych offer readers an ambitious, multimethod account of why there is so much “discontent” in the world, while identifying the “various forms” taken by contemporary anti-system movements, specifically, the rise of the far right, expressions of regime antipathy, and the move of “conspiracism” from the fringes to the center of institutional democracies. The authors trace these phenomena back to the economic crises of the Great Recession(s) beginning in 2008, as well as to the broader effects of neoliberal reforms. Registering a profound rejection of the contemporary status quo, many of these movements express their anger and disaffection in what the authors call “cultural” terms, i.e., through attacks on others’ values and identities. The causal chain, in this approach, termed provocatively by the authors an “affective political economy,” thus looks something like this: economic discontent generates emotions that are articulated in the register of “cultural discontent.” Or, in the summary at the end of Chapter three, “economics are the roots, culture, the branch, and emotions the trunk connecting the two” (70).

We write with appreciation for the clarity of the authors’ presentation, their attention to rigor, their stated desire to contribute to salutary policy reforms, and the volume’s concentration on mainstream political scientists as the key audience. The book also has an impressive comparative range—with accounts of the United States, the United Kingdom, Spain, Brazil, Chile, Canada, Portugal, and Uruguay. Its mixed-methods approach extends beyond the case studies and surveys to an experimental analysis in Chapter four. As an anthropologist and an interpretive political theorist, we leave assessments of the latter to more qualified colleagues, engaging instead the book’s conceptual contributions and substantive claims. In this regard we have three major comments.

First is the authors’ choice of *discontent* as the concept best suited to what they view as people’s rejection of the “sociopolitical status quo” (p. 2). Discontent, they point out, is broader than annoyance, so that *all* policies are bad

and *all* politicians corrupt. It also suggests agitation that runs “deeper” than irritation. The view is not that policies are simply ill-advised or otherwise worthy of critique, but that they are “intentionally harmful,” spearheaded by politicians who are themselves conceived of as malevolent (p. 2). Discontent, as opposed to, say, dissatisfaction, is also “cumulative.” Over time, the sense of leaders or the system failing repeatedly to “rectify wrongs” builds, corroding “systemic trust and confidence in the political class” (p. 2). Discontent, according to the authors, is also to some extent “latent, or unobservable,” a “vague and inchoate evaluation of the political environment: it is a free-floating, ill-defined sense that a democratic regime has gone badly off course” (p. 2).

We shall return later to the issue of latency to show how greater familiarity with affect theory could have enriched the book’s analysis. Suffice it to say for now that from our standpoint, “discontent” scarcely begins to capture the quite observable rage, resentment, and nihilistic fantasy investments we see animating contemporary political life. By implying that what is going on is well described as a lack of contentment, the very affective experiences and narratives this book rightly seeks to highlight are rendered almost anodyne, problems open to solutions of management. The misogyny of men of the Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement, the longing for a greatness that never existed, the blood curdling racist claims by President-Elect Donald J. Trump, suggest an alternative diagnostic language that might be more suited to the political economy of affect proposed by the authors.

Conceptualizing the intense animus characterizing today’s political scene as a failure of contentment has implications for the prescriptive dimensions of the book, suggesting that antipathy for democracy requires more democracy. A restored welfare state more capable of delivering goods and services will result in more allegiance and citizen buy-in. While we are sympathetic to this view, if our understanding of what is going on is correct, in its complexity and fully recognizing its affective charge, fixing it will take more than tweaking institutions or even the wholesale revitalization of the welfare state. The very populist dynamics and far-right challenges the book charts testify to large swaths of the citizenry who would oppose such moves. As Jonathan Metzl’s *Dying of Whiteness* (2019) demonstrates, the MAGA community in the United States would rather reject government-funded healthcare, living shorter, more painful lives as a result, than see their taxes go to healthcare for Black and Brown people. They prefer not having schools to having schools that teach sex education. They insist that guns keep them safe, even as the rates of gunshot suicide increase. Appreciating the hatred that fuels these movements, as well as the pleasures to be taken in the nihilism, means grasping

their fundamentally antidemocratic nature—the fear and loathing of communities within the *demos*—which characterizes contemporary right-wing politics in the United States and parts of Europe.

Second, and relatedly, although steeped in the vocabulary of political and behavioral psychology and despite the central importance of the term, the book underplays the importance of affect. Affect appears in the book largely as a synonym for emotions, while for affect theorists, the point has been to analyze the ambient feelings and atmospheres of a situation, as opposed to keying on an individual's strong, articulatable "I feel X." Lauren Berlant, for example, a preeminent theorist of affect, well understood the power of Tea Party politics and the pleasures of identification that Trump's behavior, in particular, evinces. Berlant's landmark book, *Cruel Optimism* (2011), tracked white American working-class attachments to ideas and institutions that were no longer doing affirming work for them. "Cruel optimism" refers to desires that stand as obstacles to people's own flourishing, and in this way adumbrated some of the dynamics we see in contemporary MAGA-like movements. Indeed, a 2019 feature in *The New Yorker* (Hua Hsu, "Affect Theory and the New Age of Anxiety: How Lauren Berlant's cultural criticism predicted the Trumping of politics," March 18, 2019.) commended Berlant for anticipating the coming Trumpian political scene. Drawing in part on Raymond Williams's concept of "structures of feeling," Berlant fashioned tools for thinking about unspoken base conditions through which ideology operates, identifying a "space of affective residue that constitutes what is shared [...] but circulates beneath the surface of explicit life," creating "atmospheres and environments that are occupied before they are apprehended" (Lauren Berlant, "Structures of Unfeeling: Mysterious Skin," 2015, p. 194; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 1977, p. 132).

For Williams, the idea of structures of feeling referred to "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt," to "elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feelings against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity" (Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 1977, p. 132). These elements form a set of "specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension," while at the same time existing as a social experience "which is still in process" (ibid.). The structures need not be fully formalized or institutionalized, but are "social experiences in solution," not reducible to belief systems but lived and experienced in the present in line with specific "rhythms" and "kinds of sociality" that are characterized by their potentiality. In the context of far-right politics, this potentiality has been made actual, harnessed to a political movement bankrolled by billionaires, amplified by technological innovations, and

articulated through demagogic leaders like Trump (ibid.). Like all dispositions associated with the political, far-right politics, along with other forms of populist anti-elitism, can be occupied, as Berlant told us, before they are fully apprehended; they can be lived implicitly before they are embraced explicitly. With the idea of latency, the authors approach this idea of potentiality, but for affect theorists, far from being unobservable, these feelings are open to scrutiny through methods like ethnography that encourage attunement to what Williams called "residual" forms of life. And a key take-away point for affect theorists is that these latent feelings need not be consistent to be powerful (ibid.). Moreover, contrary to conventional formulations in political science, people's feelings can be at war with their interests—which in turn are not necessarily coherently related to one another.



And this gets us to our third point: the characterization of the material and the ideational in this study. While politics aren't simply about material interests and the groups articulating them in *The Age of Discontent*, the argument remains that economic interests are ultimately what matters, and the presumption is that they are largely coherently related to one another: Neoliberalism and the crises of the 2010s produced winners and losers. The latter have found an avenue for their discontent through right-wing politics. Despite the authors' admirable attempts at comparative nuance, the book can still be read as economically reductionist. And it doesn't account for the billionaire winners who are bankrolling the anti-system movements, or for the ways most people attracted to right-wing populism would be better off with the welfare state they currently outright reject. Economic interests are not only at odds with feelings but also with each other. The interest in ever greater defense spending is at odds with the constant demands to cut taxes. Additional problems with the authors' formulations are also to be noted. Emotions appear, or "emerge," as if human beings have emotions only when politics are contentious or economic discontent is high. Whereas the economy gets a history in this study, emotions do not. "Cultural" antagonisms, as is typical in the discipline, are regarded as epiphenomenal or as a dependent variable, without much accounting for why these antagonisms take the form they do.

What if, instead of the current framework, the authors were to discard the binary between the material and the cultural in favor of recognizing relationships in which the sides are co-constituting, rather than insisting on unidirectional causality? What if they were to think dialectically about economic interests and cultural narratives, regarding them as co-implicating? Embracing the dialectic could lead to some fruitful wrestling with the incoherencies of material interests, with the tensions to be observed among affective attachments, with the lived, vaguely experienced atmospheres of entitlement and rage that are currently motoring contemporary politics toward disaster. What if

the emphasis were on the harms—economic, to be sure, but also affective and ideological from the get-go? In other words, these harms not only require an account of capitalism's policies but also their intrinsic imbrication in the affective/ideological structures that organize our expectations, desires, fantasy investments, attachments, and our antipathies.

Response to Joseph Masco and Lisa Wedeen's review of *The Age of Discontent: Populism, Extremism, and Conspiracy Theories in Contemporary Democracies*

doi:10.1017/S1537592724001713

— Matthew Rhodes-Purdy 
— Rachel Navarre 

We would first like to thank Professors Masco and Wedeen for engaging with our book and providing valuable and thought-provoking criticisms. Other points, however, pertain to issues intrinsic to comparative, generalizable political science. A key objection seems to be that our model, like all models, proposes specific causal paths and omits others. There also seems to be a linguistic disconnect. While we focus on economic crisis, we are not rational-choice theorists, nor do we only think material concerns matter; yet these topics are the focus of their review.

To start with, our goal was to explain why we often see a correlation between economic crises and discontent at the macro-level, while cultural explanations (such as cultural backlash or sentiments of being left behind) provide better explanations on the micro-level. Generalizations of this type requires trade-offs, and ours took cultural antagonisms as pre-existing.

Secondly, Wedeen and Masco suggest that “contrary to ... political science, people's feelings can be at war with their interests”; yet we do not find this to be an accurate description of political science or our work. In fact, we argue that emotions shape perceptions of interests, as much as the editors do. We claim that when faced with these crises, emotional responses cause people to embrace narratives that reflect their pre-existing cultural antagonisms. These narratives do not have to be consistent, nor

do the harms they envision have to be real. Rather, it is the perception of economic harm, and the resulting emotional responses, that matters.

Nor does our argument imply that “human beings have emotions only when politics are contentious” or that “cultural antagonisms” are “epiphenomenal.” We repeatedly argue in our book that, while our causal model is indeed unidirectional, it is (as all models are) a simplification of reality that needs to be fleshed out when applied to actual cases. Thus, in our case study chapters, we extensively discuss issues of cultural antagonisms, such as that Spanish nationalism and racial resentment in the United States were exacerbated by economic trauma but also used to help justify the neoliberal austerity that contributed to that trauma.

Another example of two disciplines divided by the same language is the discussion of affect. Our conceptualization follows neuroscientific theories of emotion used in political psychology, especially Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT), which argues that emotions occur prior to (and thus shape and mold) interest and behavior, and that these can be “independent” of their material or other interests. We confess that we are unclear on how our definition differs substantively from that used in critical theory, or in how the concept used in Affect Theory might have changed our conclusions or findings.

Finally, we are unsure how to answer some of the questions raised. How would one assume cultural antagonisms are epiphonema when the goal is to explain why they seem to matter more at some times over others? Is it not “thinking dialectically” to point out the contradiction between the comfortable lives many of the discontented lead with their anger and fear, especially when we compare their situations to those of similarly situated individuals who are not discontented, or that of ethnic, racial, or religious minorities?

Unfortunately, it still seems that we are speaking past each other. The points brought up by our colleagues are important, interesting, and vital questions that have value not just for our fields but in understanding our current political system. The question we are left with is how do we move forward and bridge these gaps in order to create communal knowledge rather than recreating the same studies in our isolated silos?