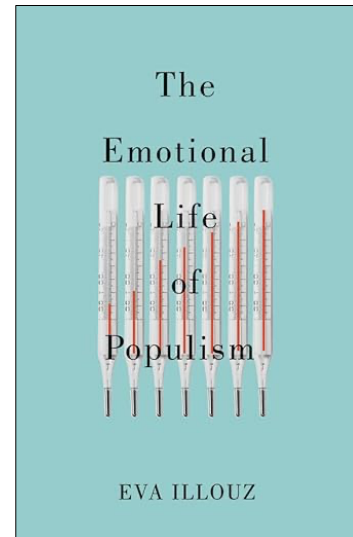


Eva Illouz, **The Emotional Life of Populism: How Fear, Disgust, Resentment, and Love Undermine Democracy**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023, 232 pp., \$20.31 (paperback).

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Populism is among the political forms “taken by [democracy’s] slow death” (p. 5), Eva Illouz states in the initial pages of ***The Emotional Life of Populism: How Fear, Disgust, Resentment, and Love Undermine Democracy***. While populism is a widely studied phenomenon, much remains to be explored about its emotional and affective dimensions. In this book, Illouz, an eminent sociologist of affect and emotions, offers incisive insights into the emotional matrix that underpins right-wing populist politics. Through the case study of Israel, she shows how emotions are strategically manipulated by populists to achieve various goals: consolidating a homogeneously imagined “people”; culturalizing socioeconomic inequalities; driving wedges between social groups by labeling certain groups as “outsiders” or “traitors”; and ultimately legitimizing the erosion of liberal democratic institutions.



The book opens with an Adorno-inspired critique of ideology and a discussion on “flawed ideologies” that distort causal frameworks, displacing the actual reasons of social groups’ discontent with manipulated frames of interpretation. Emotions, Illouz argues, play a central role in this distortion, for “only emotions have the multifold power to deny empirical evidence, to shape motivation, to overwhelm self-interest” (p. 7). Following the introduction, the book is structured around four specific emotions that are crucial to populist politics: fear, disgust, resentment, and love—of an exclusionary kind.

In the chapter on fear, Illouz describes it as “the commander in chief of all emotions” (p. 40) and convincingly argues that it is a highly exploitable emotion for authoritarian politicians who seek to bypass democratic norms and institutional constraints. According to the author, fear is central to the Israeli psyche, reinforced by deep securitization. This is not new, since survival was the key motif of the Israeli state since its inception, shaped by the traumatic history of Jewish people and the embattled geography of Israel. As Illouz notes, “When [Israel] was born, fear was born as its twin” (p. 22). However, Benjamin Netanyahu’s authoritarian populist politics has manipulated this fear recklessly, not only to deepen the perception of Arabs as threats but also to depict his liberal and left-leaning political opponents as dangerous traitors. Under Netanyahu’s leadership, fear has taken on overarching imaginary dimensions that pushed the political spectrum rightward, bred more insecurity, and enabled the circumvention of laws in the name of security. Illouz also draws parallels between Netanyahu’s instrumentalization of fear and the anti-immigrant rhetoric of populist politicians in Europe and the United States that consolidates voter support by fostering fear of a common enemy and fueling hatred.

The second emotion Illouz explores is disgust. Fear and disgust are allies, according to the author, since fear “unites us against a common enemy, while a politics of disgust ensures that we remain separate and distant from it” (p. 89). Disgust justifies the domination of social groups portrayed as “polluted,” “contaminated,” and morally degenerate. Eva Illouz explains how right wing populist discourses in Israel, allied with an ultranationalist and Orthodox interpretation of Judaism, have created a stark separation between Jews and non-Jews. This rhetoric evokes disgust not only against non-Jews, particularly Arabs and Palestinians, but also against those deemed “contaminated,” such as “secular people, left-wing people, reform Jews, feminists, homosexuals” (p. 71). The chapter highlights the religion-populism nexus and argues that rigid, exclusionary interpretations of religion can exacerbate right-wing populism to the effect of justifying and maintaining social separation, social hierarchies, and relations of domination between “us” and “them.”

Chapter 3 examines resentment, which is, as the chapter title suggests, “the hidden eros of nationalist populism”(p. 92). Evoking resentment is widely argued to be common to populist politics globally, as it is the key emotion of political polarization, which populism is known to thrive upon. Illouz builds on this argument and further asserts that resentment is particularly significant in capitalist democracies where the tension between equality as a norm and inequality as a lived reality generates it. While resentment may express a demand for justice and equality, it “can be easily hijacked and subverted by anti-democratic leaders in an atmosphere of particularism and revenge” (p.124). Right-wing populism often manipulates its direction and content, by reframing economic struggles as identity-based conflicts, fostering demands for revenge rooted in an endless ruminating on past traumas. Illouz’s analysis of how right-wing populist politics has capitalized on the past traumas of Mizrahim Jews, turning these into an ongoing resentment against Ashkenazims—who mostly constitute the more wealthy, educated, secular, and globally integrated social groups, and also Netanyahu’s opponents—is particularly sharp. The author convincingly argues that this mechanism of “latching onto real economic inequality” (p. 105) and transforming it into moral- and/or ethnic-based resentment against groups designated as “elites” fuels right-wing populist politics globally.

The fourth chapter focuses on love, the emotion that is fundamentally related to nationalism, according to Illouz. The author examines the ways in which Netanyahu has transformed Israeli nationalism from a secular to a religious, identitarian and exclusionary force. Illouz delineates how secular, left-leaning, and/or liberal intellectuals in Israel, particularly those connected to global networks and who endorse adherence to international legal standards, have been labeled as “inner enemies” by Netanyahu’s version of nationalism. This chapter is particularly strong in explaining how this version of nationalism, rife with resentment against the cosmopolitan, educated elite, becomes a source of pride for lower-middle classes who, as they lack the resources to integrate into global networks, compensate for rising social inequalities with a deepened national identification.

Illouz states that the primary objective of her book is to “describe populism through the prism of emotions” (p. 17) and to offer an interpretative framework for understanding “how the political process becomes marred by anti-democratic populist impulses” (p. 20). The book largely succeeds in this aim, with the chapters on resentment and exclusionary love standing out as particularly strong in demonstrating the common emotional mechanisms behind the global rise of right wing populisms. The sections where the author explains how the secular left is framed as the “elite” internal enemy and the target of resentment provide compelling insights into how this mechanism operates across right-wing populisms of different

contexts. However, the chapters on fear and disgust are more focused on the intricacies of the Israeli political psyche and the specific role of ultra-Orthodox version of Judaism in emboldening right-wing populism. These chapters could benefit from deeper exploration of how these emotions are instrumentalized in other contexts. For example, the analysis of fear is based on the uniqueness of Israel in terms of the country's survival-driven identity, deep securitization, and cognitive militarism, which sets Israeli populism apart from populism in other contexts. Similarly, the chapter on disgust predominantly examines Judaism's strong distinction between Jews and non-Jews. Even though these chapters occasionally attempt to draw parallels with the uses and abuses of fear and disgust in anti-immigrant populist discourses of the United States and Europe, the analysis of the commonalities remain limited.

Despite these limitations, Eva Illouz's book offers sharp and sensitive insights into the emotional playbook of right-wing populism and the detrimental effects of manipulated emotions on democracies. Her in-depth interviews with both supporters and opponents of Netanyahu's politics provide a rich and nuanced tapestry of how emotions work—sometimes in counterintuitive ways—to the effect of creating deep bonds and deep divisions among fellow citizens. The book also offers an in-depth analysis of Israeli politics, imbued with insights about the social structure, political psyche, and religion-conservative nationalism-populism nexus. This book is essential reading not only for researchers of populism and those interested in the current state of Israeli politics but also for those who seek to understand the social and political dimensions of emotions.