We do not have too much intellect and too little soul, but too little intellect in matters of the soul.

(Robert Musil, Helpless Europe, 1922)

In most theories of contemporary democratic politics, reason looms large. For some, individual citizens determine their preferences by evaluating the probabilities, costs and benefits of available options, leading to choices which in their aggregation determine political decision-making. For others, individual citizens partake in fair and equitable discussions, carefully considering competing claims and viewpoints, in order to then agree upon the best course of action for the public good. Whether describing the decision itself, or the process that leads to it, reason is considered central to the very endeavour of politics. Indeed, the supremacy of reason has often been put down as a key stage in our progression toward human perfectibility: intellect is what allows us to rise above the animal nature in us; what grants us the maturity of thinking for – and by extension, fairly ruling – ourselves.

This tradition has left us with a two-fold dilemma. Not only do these analytical models disregard a fundamental element of human experience: emotions. They also hardly correspond to the political realities in Europe as we confront them today. Brexit may be the example par excellence – from the no-punches-pulled campaigning days to the acrimony fracturing the Cabinet, the hostilities traded on social media, or the deeply held convictions determining negotiations on either side – emotions have
loomed large in every aspect of Brexit so far. And political emotionality is in evidence across Europe. This may be in formal electoral politics, such as with the populist surges in post-referendum French, Austrian, Dutch and German elections. Or it may be beyond, as with the anti-austerity movement of the young Spanish indignados (‘the indignant ones’) in 2011, their older, conservative German counterpart, the Wutbürger (‘the angry citizen’, Germany’s Neologism of the Year 2010), or the interlocutors of Stéphane Hessel’s 2010 bestseller Indignez-vous! (English title: Time for Outrage!). Politics these days seems anything but a process of measured preference formation.

To dismiss the role of the emotions in politics is thus to misconstrue the problem of contemporary politics twice over. This is not to hail them as an unalloyed good: unchecked emotions, certainly in some circumstances, can clearly be detrimental to politics. But in order to begin addressing the ramifications, we need a better understanding of how they are at work politically. For this, we can draw on a rich history of political thought, as well as an emerging set of research in political psychology, behaviour and theory. This brief chapter reflects upon three key roles played by emotions in European politics today: in decision-making, in mobilisation, and in political representation.

**Emotions and decision-making**

The epistemological and cognitive relevance of emotions, to begin with, is widely contested. Involving bodily sensations, perceptions, beliefs and desires, they may indeed be judgements, as the Stoics certainly held, about ourselves and our world – or at the very least contribute to them. But they are also considered fallible and unreliable, delivering potentially skewed assessments of reality. For Kant, the problem goes further, since it is a moral one. He makes an important distinction between the momentary flaring up of Affekt, an ‘intoxicant’ which impedes reflection but which ‘can be slept off’, and the slow-burning passion of Leidenschaft: an ‘insanity which broods over an idea that is embedding itself deeper and deeper’ (Kant 1789 [1996], 156–7). Both of these, Kant argued, corrupt reason, since they hamper our individual capacity to decide whether acts are right or wrong. Consequently, we tend to agree that in order to make fair judgements for the common good we need put aside our sentiments and ties – or at the very least, hide them behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ (Rawls 1971). In order to quarantine bias and ensure decision-making remains
‘unsullied by irrationality’ (Dworkin 2002, 365), it seemingly stands to reason that emotions need to be excised from democratic deliberation.

And yet, the empirical and normative supremacy of reason in deliberation has more recently been cast in doubt. Neuroscientists and political scientists alike now suggest that our ability to decide on a course of action is significantly impaired if we are unable to tap into our emotional resources (e.g. Damasio 1994; Marcus 2002). Practical reasoning, they posit, necessarily involves feelings. Normatively, too, emotions are increasingly held to have a distinct relationship to thought – whether as cognitive value judgements involving beliefs and desires, or as a sui generis form of rationality (e.g. Nussbaum 2001; de Sousa 1987). Emotions certainly provide us with additional elements on which we draw as we think and deliberate. They may work as intensifiers, drawing our attention to particular concepts and objects, or they may influence how we rank and prioritise them (Freeden 2013). In other words, emotions provide us with a sense of what matters, what is of concern to us as individuals. We ascribe value to one thing over another because we care more deeply about it.

Whether we like it or not, then, emotions seemingly have a place in individual decision-making. But how exactly? Recent, if pre-Brexit, research on national referendums and EU treaty changes offers some insights. Singling out two main emotions – anger and anxiety – Garry (2013) found that angry citizens were more likely driven by ‘second-order’ factors related to domestic politics and deep-seated political convictions, rather than by reflection on the precise proposition at stake. They were also more likely to support the ‘risky’ option. Anxious voters, by contrast, were more likely to seek out information, weigh up arguments and focus on the substantive issues at stake. They tended to be risk-averse, and opt for the status quo. This may be because anger and enthusiasm tend to be driven by long-standing convictions, political choices and life experiences which, ‘even if wrongly attributed and misidentified, will recruit powerful habits’ (Marcus 2002, 132). They emerge when we believe ourselves to have identified the cause of a threat and commit to redress it, stymying any further opportunities to gather and reflect on new information (Valentino et al. 2008). Anxiety and fear, by contrast, often disable customary behaviour (Marcus 2002). By making us less reliant on what we previously assumed, anxiety increases our tendency to look for new information, consider alternatives, reflect and learn. Kant’s key distinction between a surge of Affekt temporarily clouding reflection and Leidenschaft’s deep-seated hold over a person springs to mind. It is strongly held and well-entrenched
points of view that are particularly likely to shape moral or political judgement.

Making up one’s mind about a key political issue is thus not an intellectual exercise only, but one determined to a significant extent by the way we feel about the implications and repercussions of the issue in question. And yet there are limits to this insight. By concentrating on the neuropsychological dimensions of decision-making, such research necessarily obviates both historical and contextual elements that might colour and generate emotions, as well as the collective, societal dimensions of decision-making. The key question – normatively and empirically – is how we ensure that deliberation reflects the concerns of all affected. David Hume (1741 [1987]) suggested that it is the common concerns – the things that matter to us as a society – that are the source of the standards, rules, principles and norms by which we live. And we arrive at these concerns (and by extension, the relevant norms) through what Hume called moral sentiments: reflective feelings which take in, communicate with and consider the viewpoints of others. There are thus at least two further aspects to consider if we are to take the role of emotions in politics seriously: first, how arguments are framed around common concerns in order to determine and generate public political action, and second, how the concerns of affected parties can, and should, be reflected in decision-making. I will consider both of these in turn.

Emotions, motivation and mobilisation

What is it that motivates us to take action, politically or otherwise? As the likes of Hume and Montesquieu have argued, reason by itself can neither prevent nor produce any action. While passions should not exclusively guide our actions, both considered them to be their primary source. This is of course not unparalleled. Take Aristotle who, regarding reason as supreme, also acknowledged that ‘thought itself moves nothing’ (NE V2 1139a, 32–3): it is one’s desire to apply thought that produces action. Or take Rousseau, who saluted those who ‘do by inclination and passionate choice the things that men motivated by duty or interest never do quite well enough’ (Rousseau 1782 [1985], 12). Or, for that matter, Emerson, who posited that ‘nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm’ – but nothing terrible either, as Michael Walzer drily noted (Walzer 2004, 118). Indeed, the lessons of history seem clear: the dangers of calling upon shared emotions as the basis of political action pervade, or should pervade, our very understanding of modern politics (Arendt 1951). Yet
the appeal to a collective sense of emotion is precisely what drives the current politics of resentment.

We thus recognise with certain trepidation how Garry’s suggestion – that actors who are confident that reasonable voters would agree with them may be incentivised to use campaigning devices that raise as much anxiety as possible in the minds of voters (2013, 25) – backfired in the 2016 referendum. Arguably, such a strategy could not compete with strongly held convictions, misidentified or not, which had created new communities of voters across the party-political spectrum. Whereas the Leave side banked on a rousing ‘appeal to the gut, and the heart’ (Hewitt 2016) in order to mobilise voters, the Remain campaign, oft-derided as ‘Project Fear’, never quite managed to convincingly commend the Union of which they advocated membership. UKIP leader Nigel Farage actively bolstered this view: ‘People who’ve made up their minds on our side of the argument, it’s almost like a conversion. Once you’ve decided, you believe it strongly … and you’re more likely to go out and vote’, he argued in an interview. By contrast, Remainers ‘might not be bothered to go down to the polling station and vote, because there’s no passion’ (Aitkenhead 2016). Analyses of voter turnout largely corroborate this account, showing higher turnout in the age group with the highest percentage of Leave voters. Indeed, Vasilopoulou (Vasilopoulou & Wagner 2017) has suggested that the adoption of positive strategies – the explicit recourse to enthusiasm for the European project – might have benefited the Remain campaign in both voter intention and voter turnout.

Normatively, however, this presents us with a conundrum. Can we really agree that outrage ‘is more damaging than fear if we hope to foster an informed citizenry’ (Valentino et al. 2008)? After all, the history of political thought and practice should make us rather wary of how political leaders use the public’s fears – in both their affective and cognitive dimensions – in order to focus, (mis)construe and mobilise our judgments. Playing upon our own preconceptions, they all too often aim to provide explanations of the supposed causes of fear in order to elicit ‘proper’ responses to them (Robin 2004). By contrast, outrage and enthusiasm should not be all that easily dismissed. It may be true, in Hume’s words, that the ‘presumptuous boldness of character’ of the enthusiast ‘naturally begets the most extreme resolutions [and] produces the most cruel disorders in human society’. But enthusiasm is equally a ‘friend’ to civil liberty and ‘naturally accompanied with a spirit of liberty’ (Hume 1741 [1987], 77). Where would our civil rights be, had it not be for an infectious enthusiasm for change, a profound outrage against injustice? What else truly drives dissent – and the courage to speak up? This is the ‘double
truth’, the ‘inherent risk of politics as a purposeful activity’, as Walzer put it (2004, 118). Like reason, emotions can be put to just, or to severely unjust, ends.

What is interesting in the case of recent political campaigns seeking a decisive break with the status quo is their ingenious use of mobilisation’s heart and soul: credibility. It is not those who are most sincere who accumulate political capital, but those who perform sincerity most credibly. Suffice it to say that the leaders of traditional parties and career politicians, rightly or wrongly, tend not to be among them. But furthermore, by rounding on the credibility not only of ‘the establishment’ but that of ‘the expert’ (the ‘voice of reason’ par excellence), some of the referendum and electoral campaigns – Vote Leave prime among them – very effectively disarmed their counterparts’ focus on anxiety by cutting out the very agents (politicians, civil servants, academics, industry representatives) on which they relied. Endlessly replicated by broadcasters and broadsheets, and spun ever further in the echo chambers of social media, personal conviction trumped analysis. In the Brexit referendum, what was meant to elicit anxiety was delegitimised, constructed as an attempt to belittle Britain – its identity, history and potential – and consequently turned into defiant pride. It is a feature that seems to empower a new radical critique on the fringes of the political spectrum: anger that is turned against deliberative practices and those who command them – and turned against the system of representative democracy as such.

**Emotions and political representation**

Speaking on BBC1’s *Question Time* on 15 June 2016, one audience member summed up the discontent brooding among the electorate: ‘I want my country back’, he warned, ‘we’re all just so frustrated’. Condensed into the slogan ‘Take back control’, the advocates for a Leave vote skilfully channelled discontent with British political institutions tout court – institutions which are meant to structure our participation in the first place. In the UK, this played on the acute sense of disenfranchisement in a system where class divides are deep and regional disparities abundant, and whose first-past-the-post system effectively disregards all votes not cast for a constituency’s winning candidate. The delegitimisation of established institutions is, however, a more general phenomenon. Take, for instance, the 2017 French presidential and German Federal elections, in which visceral campaigns from the far right – the Front National and
Alternative für Deutschland, respectively – successfully appealed to those disenchanted with ‘mainstream’ parties who had dominated government for decades, generating unprecedented levels of support.

Is it too far-fetched to link the resurgence of passionate convictions demonstrated by the success of these movements at least partially to the very suppression of passion in politics? In his counterintuitive reading of the eighteenth century, Alfred Hirschmann (1977 [2013]) influentially argued that many of the Enlightenment’s philosophers encouraged the private pursuit of economic gain (by the commercial classes) precisely in order to curtail potentially disastrous passions (of the aristocratic elite), which all too often led to strife and war. His account suggests not only that personal interests can make for more rationally inflected political behaviour, but also has clear institutional implications. As Walzer (2004) noted, it is precisely through channelling interest that liberalism has adjusted itself to the passions. Seeking to exclude visceral conflict and affiliation, we understand our political institutions above all as facilitators and arbiters of private interests and competing conceptions of the good.

But of course, it is precisely the association between private interests and government that has raised the heat of the debate. Rather than a repository of rationality seeking to fairly administer the interests of citizens, state institutions have come under suspicion for collusion with powerful interests. As a triumphant Farage saw it in August 2016, Brexit was the victory of ‘the little people’: ‘if the ordinary decent people are prepared to stand up and fight for what they believe in, we can overcome the big banks, we can overcome the multinationals’, he argued (Jopson & Sevastopulo 2016). Liberal democracies may strive for adequate procedures, which ensure that citizens’ concerns end up legitimately undergirding state action, including constitutional principles, fair procedures and norms of accountability, access or publicity. These, however, are constrained by other factors – in particular, socioeconomic inequalities – which prevent some groups from fully participating in political processes: from having their interests weighed, from shaping common concerns (Krause, 2008).

In this context, plebiscites have come to replace elections as the democratic mechanism of choice in the minds of many. Reducing the complexity of a wide-reaching question to a simple binary choice, in which every vote counts, a referendum presents itself as a purer, more legitimate form of democracy. By so doing, it fuels distrust in the very idea of representative parliamentary democracy – to which, paradoxically, British voters wanted to return ‘control’. The problem here is one of trust,
as central to good government as it is to social relationships. Ever since in
the mid-seventeenth century John Locke described the close relationship
between (a restricted circle of) citizens and their representatives, parlia-
mentary democracy has been understood as a ‘government of trust’; Burke
spoke of Parliament as trustees representing, virtually, the whole of British
society in a ‘communion of interests’ (Frevert 2013). While there are formal
procedures to withdraw this trust, among the more dismal consequences
of the referendum has been the sustained attack on anyone – member of
parliament, Cabinet minister or judge – who, in discharging their role as
public servant, has been deemed to betray ‘the will of the people’.

Particular ire however has been reserved for the political and eco-
nomic powers that now reside outside national borders, in particular for
the EU institutions. Where the Leave campaign called for domesticat-
ing control, Marine Le Pen called for a ‘revolution in proximity’. Indeed,
the EU has consistently failed to bring the institutions ‘closer to the
citizen’. Its processes of negotiation and compromise seem remote, the
rights it extends are noticeable above all to those who move across bor-
ders, its attempts at cultivating favourable public emotions appear inau-
thentic. Yet feeling that we – and our concerns – are well represented
politically is essential for democratic politics to work. The yearning for
self-government may be misguided in a thoroughly interdependent
world; viscerally felt as it is, it still represents a fundamental challenge to
our way of doing things.

To support legitimate government and the principle of redistri-
bution, any society needs a minimum of ‘sympathy’ or ‘fellow-feeling’
between citizens, as Adam Smith readily recognised (Smith 1759
[1976]). Allowing us to engage with others – a ‘habit of imagination’ –
emotions play an intrinsic part in sustaining political communities by
establishing relationships on terms other than those of difference.
Usually, these sentiments are managed at the level of the nation, which
is prioritised as a defining, positively valorised framework that inter-
prets the national community through both territorial boundaries and
representative institutions. It is commonplace, if oversimplified, to con-
trast such ‘hot’ emotions of national identification with the ‘cool’, reflec-
tive ideal of transnational communities (Nash 2003). Just as we are
unlikely to ‘fall in love with a Common Market’, as Jacques Delors once
put it, there may be limits to our ability to invest affectively in a diverse
community of 500 million. What current political movements teach us,
if anything, is that too many feel the institutions do not represent them
politically – that they lack the (ideal of) self-determination that charac-
terises the nation.
The absence of a self-identifying *demos* has certainly troubled advocates of European integration. True, the recent crises of the EU, Brexit more than any other, have managed what decades of semi-permissive consensus have not: they have put the EU in the spotlight. Issue-based, rather than abstract, discussion has contributed to the mobilisation of interest groups and political parties alike across distinct national media spheres. People across the continent now ‘talk Europe’, if not always in an anticipated manner. Arguably, Eurosceptic movements have been able to tap into a pan-European anti-EU sentiment more successfully than their Europhile contemporaries (Usherwood & Startin 2012). But at the heart of this mobilisation is a fundamental discontent and anxiousness that takes aim at how democracies operate nationally and cooperate supranationally in order to address global processes and their repercussions. Misguided as the reasoning behind this anxiety might be, we need to address, rather than dismiss, its causes.

**Conclusions**

We live in interesting political times. In such times, the elusive ideal of rational deliberation untarnished by the messy, ungainly, and often pernicious influence of our passionate convictions holds great appeal. Yet banking on a form of reason that excludes all sentiment will offer an incomplete guide to Europe’s political future. If we describe deliberation infused by heightened emotions as fundamentally flawed, we are only likely to fan cynicism. It might prove more useful if we acknowledge the fundamental role of these deeply held convictions that spill over into anger and enthusiasm. In other political times, raising doubts about the validity of a risky, if viscerally felt, course of action might have sustained the status quo. But in these times, cost–benefit calculations are unlikely to keep the EU – and national governments – in citizens’ good books. Rather than playing to the gallery, public authorities need to invest in (re)gaining the trust of the electorate. After all, much of the resentment is not only issue-based but fanned by the fundamental feeling of not being heard: the emotional politics in Europe today is, at base, a judgement on the nature of liberal representative democracy itself, and the political norms on which it has developed.