

# From ‘I Think’ to ‘I Feel’

STEPHEN COLEMAN

## Abstract

This article explores what pollsters, journalists and politicians mean when they refer to the ‘mood’ of a nation, population or community. To what extent does the concept of mood resemble and differ from the notion of ‘public opinion’? It is argued that the ubiquity of mood-talk reflects a move away from the myth that political action is motivated by rational instrumentalism. Attention to mood takes seriously the force of pre-cognitive affectivity and its shaping of public disposition; the disorientating effects of diffuse globalism in which experiences and the feelings to which they give rise do not have obvious causes; and the emergence of new spaces in which affects travel and mutate freely, widely and rapidly. The article suggests that we are living in moody times in which attention to the public zeitgeist may be more important than polling responses to discrete issues.

**Keywords:** mood, feeling, agency, pre-cognitive, public opinion, populism

POLITICAL STATEMENTS that used to begin with the words ‘I think’ or ‘I believe’ increasingly start with the words ‘I feel’, marking a movement from opinion to mood that is far from semantically trivial. Serious political commentators refer frequently to the mood—of communities, classes, generations and entire nations—as if this were a legible phenomenon to be ‘read’ and acted upon. For example, in an analysis of that seismic shock to the British economy, Brexit, the journalist Jonathan Freedland explained that it was ‘more of a mood than a policy’.<sup>1</sup> Writing in his blog about the disastrous outcome of Truss-Kwarteng economic policy, *The Economist’s* British economics correspondent, Duncan Weldon, stated that ‘I think the initial reaction to the mini-budget was as much about the vibes as the policies.’<sup>2</sup> Writing in *The Guardian* newspaper, the political journalist, Andy Beckett, observed that ‘Britain seems in a

strange mood as 2023 bleakly begins’. The strangeness is not simply that ‘one of the world’s richest countries ... has in many ways become dysfunctional’, but that

the response from voters seems complex and relatively muted. There is fear—please don’t let me need a hospital—and frustration at how the stoppages and shortages are dragging on. There is disbelief at the country’s accelerating deterioration; but also fatalism, a feeling that Britain was due a fall after years of cost-cutting, complacency and over-indulgence. There is exhaustion at the sheer length of the disruption; and scepticism about the ability of any politician to end it. But there is less overt anger than might reasonably be expected.<sup>3</sup>

Political pollsters also have much to say about mood. YouGov conducts a weekly ‘mood tracker’ and felt able to declare on 21 April 2021 that ‘Britons’ mood is improving with happiness and contentment levels at their highest this year after a big slump during

<sup>1</sup>J. Freedland, ‘Brexit is a mood, not a policy—and Liz Truss captures it in all its delusion’, *The Guardian*, 22 July 2022; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/jul/22/brexit-liz-truss-delusion-rishi-sunak-tory-members>

<sup>2</sup>D. Weldon, ‘Learning the wrong lessons: the UK macro-policy mix looks awful. Again’, *Value Added* blog, 10 November 2022; <https://duncanweldon.substack.com/p/learning-the-wrong-lessons>

<sup>3</sup>A. Beckett, ‘Starmer may lack Blair’s charisma, but he may well change Britain more than New Labour ever did’, *The Guardian*, 6 January 2023; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/06/keir-starmer-tony-blair-reform-new-labour-90s>

lockdown'.<sup>4</sup> The polling organisation, Britain Thinks, publishes an annual *Mood of the Nation* report which, it says, combines 'public sentiment polling with in-depth qualitative focus groups to produce a unique and comprehensive understanding of the disposition of British citizens'.<sup>5</sup>

Politicians have picked up on mood-talk. For example, speaking in the House of Commons on 22 June 2022, the Conservative MP John Redwood declared that

This Parliament is the main guarantor of our rights and liberties; it created them in battles over many centuries for the benefit of us all. Would not this great role be strengthened if our Supreme Court were indeed supreme and not answerable to foreign courts that do not understand the mood of the British people and what they expect of their legislators?<sup>6</sup>

On the other side of the political divide, Labour MP Barry Sheerman told the House of Commons that 'We are all campaigners in this place, and the truth is that we know when a particular incident is suddenly going to change the public mood and the public mind in terms of urgency, priority and the dramatic need for action'.<sup>7</sup>

What do journalists, pollsters and politicians mean when they make these references to political mood? Is it merely a variant of the term 'public opinion', itself a concept that, when first promoted as a scientific account of social reality in the 1930s, was regarded with some scepticism? As we shall see, when asked to explain what they mean by political mood, most politicians, pollsters and journalists insist that it points to something significant, but are somewhat hesitant to state what it means or how it might best be detected.

At a theoretical level, three conceptions of mood are utilised within separate disciplinary

boundaries, each pointing towards different meanings. In psychological theory, mood comprises subjective dispositional qualities and traits that are empirically observable.<sup>8</sup> Although mainly applied to individual states of mind, variables such as fearfulness, bitterness, hopefulness and fatigue are sometimes extended to describe the political psyche of an entire population. When, for example, Lauren Berlant states that contemporary capitalism is characterised by 'the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence', she is drawing upon language that would more conventionally be applied to a burnt-out individual.<sup>9</sup> Thought of in these terms, political mood can be represented as an ordering of affect underlying collective political motivation and action.

Some political scientists have sought to produce a quasi-empirical definition of political mood as 'an aggregate measure of the public's preferences as expressed through opinion polls'.<sup>10</sup> It can be derived, they argue, through profiles of public inclinations as stated in response to cognitively framed preference and attitude questions. Political mood is in this sense little more than a longitudinal aggregate of public opinion, determined by thermostatic fluctuations within identifiable boundaries of preference.

Straying further away from notions of empirical correspondence to a materially objective reality are cultural accounts of mood which focus upon the enigmatic ways in which diffuse affective undercurrents appear to 'make

<sup>4</sup>E. Nolsoe, 'Britons are the happiest they've been this year as COVID restrictions lift', YouGov, 21 April 2021; [https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/35395-britons-are-happiest-theyve-been-year-covid-restri?redirect\\_from=%2Ftopics%2Fsociety%2Farticles-reports%2F2021%2F04%2F21%2Fbritons-are-happiest-theyve-been-year-covid-restri](https://yougov.co.uk/society/articles/35395-britons-are-happiest-theyve-been-year-covid-restri?redirect_from=%2Ftopics%2Fsociety%2Farticles-reports%2F2021%2F04%2F21%2Fbritons-are-happiest-theyve-been-year-covid-restri)

<sup>5</sup>*Mood of the Nation 2021*, Britain Thinks; <https://thinksinsight.com/mood-of-the-nation-2021/>

<sup>6</sup>House of Commons Debates, 5th ser. vol. 716, col. 857, 22 June 2022.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, col. 971.

<sup>8</sup>B. Parkinson, P. Totterdell, R. B. Briner and S. Reynolds, *Changing moods: The Psychology of Mood and Mood Regulation*, London, Longman, 1996; W. N. Morris, *Mood: The Frame of Mind*, New York, Springer, 2012.

<sup>9</sup>L. Berlant, 'Slow death (sovereignty, obesity, lateral agency)', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2007, pp. 754–780.

<sup>10</sup>P. K. Enns and P. M. Kellstedt, 'Policy mood and political sophistication: why everybody moves mood', *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 38, no. 3, 2008, pp. 433–454; C. Claassen, 'In the mood for democracy? Democratic support as thermostatic opinion', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 114, no. 1, 2020, pp. 36–53; J. Stimson, *Public Opinion in America: Moods, Cycles, and Swings*, London, Routledge, 2018.

sense without necessarily being thought about.<sup>11</sup> In a society that is increasingly conscious of and governed by waves of public emotion, political mood is regarded by cultural theorists as an affectively diffuse and fleeting phenomenon, experienced as ineffable sensation that resists articulation.

Are the journalists, pollsters and politicians who seek to describe, measure or promote political mood drawing on all or any of these theories, or do they have something else in mind when they employ the term? Between 17 May and 16 June 2022, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with four Members of the UK House of Commons, one Member of the Scottish Parliament, four political broadcasters (two reporters, one national phone-in presenter and a producer) and three heads of political polling for leading UK opinion research companies. Each interviewee was selected because they had referred to 'political mood' in recent speeches, articles or reports. The purpose of these interviews was to understand what the term's most influential users think it signifies; what, if anything, its usage adds to the contemporary political lexicon; and how the phenomenon might be investigated more insightfully.

Each interviewee was asked how they would explain to an 'outsider', unfamiliar with the idiomatic jargon of political discourse, the meaning of the term 'political mood'. Nearly all of them paused for thought when faced with this question, acknowledging that there was nothing like a readily available meaning of the concept to which they could turn. Instead, interviewees employed one or more of four definitional strategies.

The first was to invoke suggestive metaphors. People turn to metaphor when something that is difficult to comprehend, describe or adjust to can be made to seem more

meaningful seen from the viewpoint of something else. Several interviewees endeavoured to shift the term political mood from one frame of reference to another in the hope of illuminating its meaning. For example, in my interview with a BBC journalist who specialised in going around the country to find out what people were really thinking and feeling about political issues, the following series of (italicised) metaphors were used:

- The role I do is ... a vague attempt to *take the political temperature*.... I mean, the public political mood ... i.e. how things are *going down* publicly outside of Westminster.
- I try to find out the general *flavour* ... what you get it a sense of when *things move or change*.
- You get a *vibe*. I that's really the best thing we can hope to do.
- I think that the aim is to get a sense of whether this is really *cutting through* to people.
- The aim is to get a sense of how much this is really *playing out*.

In similar ways, pollsters spoke about how they sought to 'penetrate beyond the Westminster bubble' and politicians spoke about their desire to 'get a feel for the real world'. Amidst this riot of metaphors an emergent answer to my question about meaning was simmering, but mainly through allusion rather than definition. It was as if the concept of political mood was so complex that it could only be approached by poetically reframing it with a view to connotation from a semantic distance. It was as if mood was a lyrical precursor of what might eventually take a more coherent empirical shape.

A second response entailed attempts to define political mood in terms of what it is not. The most common contradistinction was to public opinion. All my interviewees, including opinion pollsters, were keen to show that they recognised a difference between surveys, in which sample groups are asked questions with a view to projecting their preferences and intentions to a larger population, and more penetrating endeavours to understand people's affective life-worlds and perceptual horizons. Curiosity about political mood was explained as a need to drill beneath the flatness of data with a view to gaining access to forms

<sup>11</sup>K. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, Durham NC, Duke University Press, 2007; N. Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect*, London, Routledge, 2008; B. Anderson, 'Affective atmospheres', *Emotion, Space and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2009, pp. 77–81; B. Highmore, *Cultural Feelings: Mood, Mediation and Cultural Politics*, London, Routledge, 2017; S. Coleman, 'Feeling it/not feeling it: mood stories as accounts of political intuition', *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2022, pp. 477–495.

of experiential and felt political subjectivity that cannot be captured by the quantitative reductionism of survey research. The implication here is that mood is somehow deeper and broader than ‘scientific’ quantification can apprehend; that its fluidity and nuance makes it inherently elusive; and that accessing its meaning requires a mode of sensibility that has yet to be fully refined.

As well as drawing a distinction between survey-based political opinion and mood, several interviewees were keen to repudiate the idea that political mood can be discerned by tracking the incessant buzz of social media. Whatever political mood might be, they insisted, the unrepresentative noises off from social media should be regarded as a distraction. As one senior Labour MP put it, ‘Social media has created the echo chamber. And it’s a bit scary. People reflect back what they hear from their own echo chamber as “what everybody thinks”, whereas it’s only what you get in your little social media bubble.’ Rejecting both the pseudo-objectivity of survey research and the random subjectivity of social media noise, proponents of definition by negation appeared to be casting doubt on conventional techniques for representing public feeling, while holding on to the idea of public feeling as a phenomenon that is worth talking about and tracking.

A third approach to definition was to point to an example of a moment in which political mood mattered. My interviews were conducted during the heat of the ongoing ‘partygate’ scandal in which senior UK government figures, including the prime minister, were accused of flagrantly breaking their own lockdown and social distancing rules. Several interviewees alluded to the widespread and intense public feelings aroused by ‘partygate’ as illustrations of something more than an expression of ephemeral preferences or partisan loyalties. As one senior political pollster put it, referring to the first few weeks in which the scandal hit the headlines: ‘I can’t remember anything the public had ever been as angry about as they were. We talk about cut-through. My God, partygate had cut-through.’ Another pollster referred to partygate as a perfect illustration of the volatility of public mood:

In the immediate aftermath of Boris Johnson being elected in 2019 the mood of the country was pretty positive. People were quite excited

and interested and thought that politicians were going to deliver for them. And then, obviously, if you take a measure of the mood of the country now, with inflation biting, with real political distrust in the wake of Partygate, you get a very different read. It’s almost a process of osmosis, when you’re sitting in these focus groups, week after week after week, that you can pick that up alongside the polls as well.

A national phone-in producer drew attention to the emotive texture of mood expression during critical political episodes like partygate: ‘I think when you come to those phone-ins about partygate, it has been something where there has been a quite a visceral response, very much based on how you’re feeling.’ By turning from acts of definition to acts of reference, these interviewees were suggesting that even if the meaning of political mood is difficult to elucidate, the practices associated with it are clearly recognisable. It is in practice that people sense, mediate and act upon moods, regardless of whether they are able to articulate what it is to which they are responding. Indeed, it might be the very inexpressibility of what they are sensing that makes it so intensely conspicuous as a social element.

The fourth response to my initial question was denial that political mood is a meaningful concept. As with political opinion over the years, there are sceptics who doubt whether political mood is more than an alluring delusion. One Conservative MP, a former party whip, insisted that the search for a pervasive political mood of the moment is a delusion encouraged by journalists and lazily bought into by politicians. Mood is, he argued, pure fantasy: ‘I mean, I do not know what the political mood is ... You know, you get groupthink. So people think this up in the Press Gallery or the Whips think “This is the mood of the party or the mood of the supporters of the Conservative Party or the mood of the nation” and it’s all just a group thing.’ According to this politician, not only were claims about the political mood of the public platitudinous and lazy, but their source in ephemeral emotionality rendered them inherently unreliable. A veteran Labour MP concurred, lamenting that, ‘I sort of get this feeling that politics has moved a lot from leading opinion to reflecting mood, which isn’t a good thing. So we’re always trying to capture the mood rather than lead the debate.’

This tendency to dismiss mood as a nebulous concept, destined by its unfathomable impalpability to occupy the outer margins of plausible description, led to a sense that one could only ever hope to speak about political mood in suggestively impressionistic terms; that the concept was simply too flimsy to constitute more than an allusive aside. Indeed, several of my interviewees confessed to a kind of methodological inadequacy in their frequent references to political mood. As one BBC journalist who regularly travels around the country to gain a sense of how people are feeling put it:

I am constantly conscious that I cannot measure the political mood. I have no method to do that and there is no science behind that and this isn't a scientific ambition or aim, and I would never expect it to be. In fact, on air and in reports I frequently say that this isn't science based. It's a sense, as opposed to the science and I feel a real responsibility to always be clear in that.

I asked this journalist to expand upon the notion that discerning political mood entails sense rather than science and they explained that, 'I can always be way off the mark. You have to take everything with a healthy pinch of salt. I haven't done a sample of you know X many people. There isn't a sort of method. But you get to know when people are talking about things, and when they're not.' It was as if that which could not be counted or measured was bound to be putatively specious; that to speak of a political mood was to abandon the standards of reliability which are essential to credible political narrative. As one politician put it, in defence of their claim that political mood is irrelevant and distracting, 'Most people, and even most journalists, wouldn't even know what standard deviation is, and I suspect most people in the government would be asking me that question. They don't know what standard deviation is.' Without such technical confidence, he maintained, there can be no astute insight. This amounted to a claim that descriptive legitimacy depends upon scientific procedure. But does that not fail to acknowledge the unformulated texture upon which many of people's most profound subjective political judgments are made? To dismiss as meaningless that which cannot be measured would seem to imply that only

through social scientific techniques can social reality be apprehended.

## From what mood means to what mood does

When the public opinion industry emerged in the 1930s its success depended less upon a theoretical rationale than a capacity to demonstrate practical effects. As a technology for counting and monitoring people with a view to predicting their future actions, polling possessed a utility that was more important than any theoretical claims made by its promoters. The technical method of aggregation introduced by polling satisfied a pressing social need to track the behavioural volatility of a mass population whose agency as enfranchised voters and selective consumers had become critically important for political and economic success. The recent legitimisation of the representative sample method provided pollsters with a credible basis for asking questions to small, carefully selected groups and then projecting their preferences and intentions to a larger population. But it was not this statistical innovation that made polling politically significant: it was its capacity to generate real-world effects by inferring how well elite persuaders were performing and predicting how current beliefs might translate into future behaviour that led to this new political technology becoming embedded as a core feature of democratic culture. The jury might still be out on whether polling really captures the public's opinion, but few political practitioners would disagree that it makes things happen.

Perhaps we should be focussing rather less upon the abstract meaning of political mood as a definable phenomenon and more upon the practical ways in which mood-talk frames public action. I want to suggest that attention to political mood responds to three elements that are re-shaping the ways in which people think, feel and act in the contemporary public sphere. The first is an increasing acknowledgement of the force and legitimacy of public emotions within the public sphere. Those who eschew such acknowledgement in the name of dispassionate rationality are widely regarded as out of touch technocrats. As the presenter of a national daily phone-in show put it to me:

If I was a politician I would make far more use of it [mood] than they do at the moment. I've been watching the hustings. I've been watching their speeches. I see things that politicians say and I see examples where, if only they picked up on the mood of the question, rather than giving those kind of pro forma answers ... they could give a more emotional acknowledgement to what people are saying.

Opinion polling was established in an era that took for granted distinctive contrasts between reason and emotion, intellect and affect, mind and body. Poll respondents were invited to state what they thought, not how they felt. They might not always (or even often) have manifested cognitive rationality or consistency, but the normative expectation was for them to possess a certain prudential, calculative composure, undistracted by the visceral and volatile pull of unruly affect. In recent decades, this dualism has been called into question, as affective sources of political motivation have increasingly been found to transcend instrumentalism and precede cognition. Neuroscientists have distinguished between two basic systems of information processing, one being 'implicit, un verbalized, rapid and automatic', the other 'explicit, verbalized, slow and deliberate'.<sup>12</sup> This dual-process model opens up a conceptual space for thinking about moments of intuitive perception which precede cognition—and political scientists are beginning to take this seriously.

Political communication depends increasingly upon the mobilisation of affect—upon making people feel certain ways about themselves, others, their pasts and futures. Politicians have become experts in dispositional priming: making people conscious of new anxieties and desirous of ends that they had not previously cared about. Political

communication increasingly entails sophisticated appeals to emotional attention. A growing fusion between politics and performance means that political leaders are increasingly required to serve as containers for the projection of amorphous public feelings. But how are these valuable political qualities to be spoken about in political discourse? How can a discursive code that has for so long prided itself upon truth claims, however spurious, translate its appeal so as to acknowledge a polity in which subjective perceptions and objective conditions are unstably associated?

Political mood, in this sense, describes that dimension of public disposition which cannot be captured through the study of formed, cognitive opinions. For, to be in a mood is not to adopt a view about the world, but to be somehow acted upon by the world in ways that are inchoate, confounding and non-negotiable. In *The Guardian* article by Andy Beckett quoted above, reference is not being made to the kind of opinions that might be picked up by pollsters, vox-pop journalists or 'listening' politicians about shortage, disruption and cost-cutting in British public services. The story here is about the collapse in people's sense of their own political agency; a crushing demoralisation and exhaustion that has worn people down, resulting in a pervasive mood of inert fatalism. Standard opinion research asks questions about formed preferences and enacted behaviour, but cannot get at the dynamics of collective demotivation that Beckett identifies. Understanding what limits people's capacity to adopt resistant or disruptive positions entails engagement with the scaled-down nature of their projective horizons and these entail attention to mood rather than opinion.

A second impetus for attention to political mood is the prevalent sense that the roots and ramifications of political events, processes and shocks are too complex and diffuse to be pinned down. The tangled, global-networked flows of late modernity seem to be characterised by what the philosopher, John Dewey, referred to as 'the invisible within the visible'; it often seems as if causes and connections of social phenomena are too confusing to be appraised by singular, object-related opinions. Opinions might be contingent, but moods are cumulative and often lingering, prevailing across borders, periods and even domains

<sup>12</sup>G. Stoker, C. Hay and M. Barr, 'Fast thinking: implications for democratic politics', *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 55, no. 1, 2018, pp. 3–21; W. E. Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed*, Minneapolis MN, University of Minnesota Press, 2002; M. Lodge, C. Taber and C. Weber, 'First steps toward a dual-process accessibility model of political beliefs, attitudes, and behavior', in D. Redlawsk, ed., *Feeling Politics: Emotion in Political Information Processing*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 11–30.

such as polity, economy and entertainment. Of course, political feelings have always circulated beyond obvious causes, but the accelerated and cross-cutting nature of mood waves seem recently to have assumed an independent force, as if political adjectives have become as important (or more so) than substantive nouns. Political moods of resentment, disappointment, exhaustion, revenge and distraction emerge as political frames in their own right, their manifestation in particular events a matter of secondary interest. The ‘political temperature’ and ‘vibes’ that enable the BBC journalist quoted above to sense ‘what’s going down’ are not merely backdrops to the story, but are the story. Political mood pays little attention to relationships between subjective apprehensions and objective experiences. An opinion is about something out there that is perceived. A mood engulfs the perceiver.

The third reason for the current interest in political mood is that so many more people are now able to express themselves in public—or quasi-public—online settings. Rightly, some of my interviewees warned against reading the public mood from the relatively small and unrepresentative outpourings of sentiment on platforms like Twitter. So-called sentiment analysis, whereby public feeling is supposedly tracked on the basis of narrow, binaric linguistic analyses of comments by self-selected social media regulars, should not be trusted. But that is not to deny that there are moments in which public feeling spills out online, inflecting language, tonality, visual imagery and connective energy in ways that might not be accurately measurable, but ought not to be ignored by the politically perceptive. That is why political parties, governments and corporations devote so much energy to listening to the ripples and waves of this affective pressure gauge. The political wayside is littered with the career remains of those who failed to ‘read the room’. Much of this entails a sensibility to salience and intensity; it is not just what people think about issues that matter, but why and with what fervour. It is in this sense that Jonathan Freedland was right to think of Brexit as having been more a referendum about mood than policy.

Political moods do not comprise preferences or opinions, even though they bear upon their formation. Rather than describing settled

positions, political moods refer to unsettled dispositions; forms of attunement and responsiveness to the world that lay the ground for comprehension and volition. Political moods refer to an affective excess that is rarely captured by asking people what they think or believe. Their significance within contemporary discourse reflects a growing sense that political experience is too diffuse and multi-layered to be neatly tied to single issues. They thrive within a hyper-abundant media ecology in which the tone of the public chorus is often more telling than its content.

## Living in moody times

To live in an era of populist politics is to live in distinctly moody times. Much has been written about precisely what populism might mean and the reasons for its global spread, but few would disagree with its most erudite analyst, Margaret Canovan, that ‘Populism’s fundamental structural characteristic ... implies not only a direct simple style but also a characteristic *mood*’ (her emphasis).<sup>13</sup> Similarly, one of the most widely cited academic papers on populism refers to it as a ‘zeitgeist’.<sup>14</sup> What is being correctly implied by these characterisations is that the populist frame of mind is inflected less by specific intellectual or ideological commitments than by a sense of being caught up in a social drama in which one has been given the wrong part: a voice without sufficient efficacy; a biography without proper recognition and respect; values accorded inadequate weight. One element of the populist mood reflects bitterness in the face of failed expectations; the other element releases fantasies of grandiose projection. The populist mood prepares people for attachment to leaders and policies, but what is salient in these surges of political energy is unprocessed feeling more than strategic purpose.

Making sense of populist moods calls for different tools and techniques than are used to discover cognitive positions. Deep listening to people’s stories, beginning with their lives

<sup>13</sup>M. Canovan, ‘Trust the people! Populism and the two faces of democracy’, *Political Studies*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1999, pp. 2–16.

<sup>14</sup>C. Mudde, ‘The populist zeitgeist’, *Government and Opposition*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2004, pp. 541–563.

in general and moving on to political reflection, is a valuable way of getting to grips with mood. In her magisterial study of southern states' US Tea Party supporters, Arlie Hochschild was only able to grasp the disappointments, resentments, fears and hopes of her research subjects by literally giving them her time, reaching honestly towards the sources of their meanings and motives and, as she put it, crossing 'the empathy wall' which too often leaves liberal academics sneering from a distance at people's heartfelt beliefs or delusions.<sup>15</sup> The lessons here for mood research is that comprehending other psyches takes time (more like the temporal pace of political anthropology than market research), subtle sensitivity to place and context, and a capacity to accept ambivalence and inconsistency.

Returning to the question of what it means to speak of political mood, I want to suggest that we are dealing here with thoughts and feelings that have yet to take a determinate

form and potentialities that precede agentic energy. Driven by mood, political actors are operating at some distance from settled intentionality. The politician who complained to me that such states are too amorphous to be pinned down and measured was right. Interviewees who grasped for metaphors in the hope that poetry might accomplish what positivism could not, were also thinking along the right lines. Like impressionist art, accounts of political mood are bound to be blurry. To speak of political mood can seem like a failure to grasp clear perspectives—to enter a bleary zone of uncertainty and disorientation. But that, I would argue, is the strength of the concept, for is it not precisely such uncertainty and disorientation that characterises most of us most of the time?

*Stephen Coleman* is Professor of Political Communication, University of Leeds

---

<sup>15</sup>A. R. Hochschild, *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, New York, The New Press, 2018.