# The Politics of Fear and Hate: Experience, (De)legitimisation, and (De)mobilisation

# Introduction

Heidenau, August 21st 2015. Several hundred Neo-Nazis demonstrate against a newly erected asylum seeker home, throwing stones, bottles, and fireworks at police officers (Dassler and Meisner 2015). Berlin, August 22nd 2015. Two Neo-Nazis urinate on children on a bus, calling the children and their mother “Jews” whilst declaring themselves to be the “master race” (*Berliner Zeitung* 2015). Salzhemmendorf, August 28th 2015. At around 2 am, a man throws a Molotov cocktail into a children’s room in an asylum seeker home; by sheer coincidence, the children are not in the room, and nobody gets hurt (*Der Spiegel* 2015a). These are all examples of political violence that directly impinge on the physical security of asylum seekers, migrants, and minoritised communities. Crucially, these were not isolated incidents. Between 2013 and 2015, the number of attacks on asylum seeker homes in Germany increased 18-fold, and after the infamous sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year’s Eve violence against asylum seekers “skyrocketed to unprecedented heights” (Frey 2020, 695). Politicians and media at the time extensively debated this sharp rise in far-right violence against asylum seekers and anti-migration sentiments, largely attributing and reducing these issues to hate. However, as Hall and Ross (2019) highlight, affective dynamics at the micro-level are too diverse, messy, transient, and multifaceted to be accurately captured by a single emotion label. Put differently, the employment of emotional labels at the macro-level of public discourse to describe micro-level affective experiences is always a political and disciplinary act. The question this article raises is: How can we conceptualise actors’ claims about hate and their political implications?

From a critical security studies perspective, one thing is evident: These acts of violence are all associated with the securitisation of migration, both in psychological (Kinnvall 2004) and material (Van Rythoven 2015) terms. Migrants, in this sense, have become perceived as existential threats by segments of the population, whether it be to their ontological or physical security. Yet here we encounter a stumbling block. Securitisation is usually associated with fear (Huysmans 2006; Kinnvall 2004; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020; Van Rythoven 2015; Williams 2011). However, fear does seem somewhat inappropriate as an explanatory factor when discussing political violence against minorities, and actors largely refrain from using it as such. To use the examples from above, neither urinating on children nor throwing Molotov cocktails in children’s rooms can be convincingly argued to originate in fear. Political actors and commentators will nonetheless often attribute such violent actions to emotions, but in this case to hate rather than fear. Such a description may be an educated guess based on common-sense understandings of hate, but more importantly, it constitutes a political claim. This article suggests that political claims about the emotions of fear and hate are integral to (de)securitisation dynamics and beyond, thus necessitating analytical attention. After all, as Sternberg and Sternberg (2008, 197) highlight, “fear, and hate are everyday realities that influence all of our lives”.

The crucial question is, why does it matter whether politicians, journalists, or academics label the emotional driver behind political violence as fear or hate considering that these two emotions are seemingly rather similar in their outcomes? To answer this question, we must look at the politics of emotions at the macro-level of public discourse. As the state holds a monopoly on violence, committing acts of violence, be it physical or verbal, is ethically unacceptable and legally punishable for any other actor. When acting out of fear, however, violence can be ethically justifiable and legally permissible. In contrast, when acting out of hate, committing violence becomes ethically despicable and legally especially grave and punishable. Consequently, arguing that acts of violence as motivated by fear depoliticises and, to an extent, justifies these acts by downplaying the accountability and agency of the perpetrators. Contrarily, claiming that acts of violence were motivated by hate problematises and delegitimises this form of political action. In other words, discussing acts of political violence and affect-induced political behaviour at the micro-level more generally always involves a politics of emotions that ascribes feelings to actors, asserts whether they are valid and moral or not, what normative connotations these emotions have, and to what extent they (de)legitimise the actions of the perpetrators. This politics of fear and hate is, of course, not restricted to political violence, as similar dynamics are observable in descriptions of demonstrations, social movements, populism, and so on.

The two fields of research that are most equipped to explore the role of negative emotions in International Relations are arguably the scholarship on securitisation that investigates how certain objects are constructed as fearsome existential threats that necessitate emergency security measures (Van Rythoven 2015; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020) and the literature on the politics of emotions that interrogates “who gets to express emotions, [and] what emotions are perceived as (il)legitimate or (un)desirable” (Beattie, Eroukhmanoff, and Head 2019, 136). Yet, to date neither has offered a sustained engagement with the emotion of hate. To address this lacuna, this article conceptualises the role of both fear and hate in the politics of emotions surrounding (de)securitisation processes. The analytic value of conceptualising hate is at least threefold. First, it offers a more nuanced analysis of (de)securitisation dynamics. Second, it draws attention to the intersections of the politics of emotions and securitisation processes, in particular to how fear and hate are invoked by political actors as supposed group emotions. Third, it encourages self-reflectivity in emotion research and draws attention to the ways researchers have “enact[ed] social and political worlds” (Aradau and Huysmans 2014, 603) in their research on securitisation by highlighting the role of fear over that of other emotions. Based on these insights, the article develops the notion of the politics of fear and hate which denotes the ways in which these emotions are invoked at the macro-level of public discourse in (de)securitisation processes to label affective embodied experiences driving political behaviour at the micro-level, (de)legitimise these behaviours and certain positions, and (de)mobilise populations around them.

Whilst existing research has focused on the politics of emotions at the micro-level or the macro-level (Beattie, Eroukhmanoff, and Head 2019; Bilgic and Gkouti, 2021; Gellwitzki and Houde 2022; Gustafsson and T. H. Hall 2021), this article suggests that it is the dynamic interaction between the two that develops far-reaching political implicatoins in (de)securitisation processes. In other words, the politics of emotions become most relevant when there are widespread embodied experiences at the micro-political that are circulated, (re)produced, and compressed into particular emotions at the macro-level of public discourse. Moreover, whilst the existing literature on the politics of emotions talks about emotions in general (Beattie, Eroukhmanoff, and Head 2019; Bilgic and Gkouti, 2021; Gellwitzki and Houde 2022; Gustafsson and T. H. Hall 2021) or focuses on one particular emotion in securitisation processes, that is fear, albeit sometimes in conjunction with anxiety (Van Rythoven 2015; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020), this article contends that focusing on the interplay between fear and hate that is particularly insightful. This moves beyond a parochial focus on a singular emotion category (see Eroukhmanoff 2020; Solomon 2013; Ross 2014 for discussions on this predicament) whilst nonetheless capturing the “often intense symbolic struggles where agents strive to cultivate specific types of emotions among audiences” (Van Rythoven 2015, 466).

The article commences by briefly discussing how fear and to a lesser extent hate, have been theorised in the field of IR. It proceeds to elaborate on how hate has been conceptualised in different literatures, as well as its relationship to fear. The following section contrives a framework that theorises when and why actors may invoke hate and fear respectively. The last section illustrates the empirical value of this framework by looking at the case of Germany during the so-called migration crisis.

## Fear and Hate in International Relations

Fear, the embodied response to existential threats to physical security, is arguably the most theorised emotion in International Relations (Hutchison 2016). According to critical security studies, fear is crucial to the initiation, success, and failure of (de)securitisation processes–the construction of an object or other as fearsome existential threat or the reversal thereof. Actors can instrumentalise fear to both securitise issues and to inhibit securitising moves (Williams 2011). Fear is integral for audiences’ acceptance of the implementation of otherwise inconceivable emergency measures and the breaking free of the rules of normal everyday politics (Van Rythoven 2015). Indeed, much of IR theory posits a direct link between fear and mass mobilisation (Van Rythoven 2018). The emergence of fears and the securitisation of particular issues have also been associated with psychological processes derivative of broader anxieties (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020). The politics of fear and successful securitising moves are thus more likely to occur in environments with widespread anxieties (Rumelili 2021). Securitisation processes might translate into direct physical violence by individuals or the state, and, through the institutionalisation and bureaucratisation of security practices, into structural violence.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In contrast to fear, hate has received little attention from scholars of securitisation and the politics of emotions in IR. However, other scholarship has highlighted the political nature of hate in detail. Hate is argued to be an integral part of nationalism (Ahmed 2014) and is thus a fundamental, albeit implicit and conceptually underdeveloped component of IR theory (Crawford 2000). It is furthermore associated with political violence (Ahmed 2014; N. Hall 2013; Sternberg and Sternberg 2008; Fischer et al. 2018). In WWII, for example, hate was instrumentalised and mobilised to motivate and justify atrocities (Dower, 1988 cited in Crawford 2000, 122). As is the case of fear, hate can motivate political actors and audiences to act in otherwise inconceivable ways yet also be instrumentalised for political (de)mobilisation (Ahmed 2014; Kaufman, 2003; Richards 2013). Despite that, and even though hate is often associated with political mobilisation, violence, and conflict, unlike fear, it has been largely left unattended by scholars of critical security studies and the politics of emotions alike. The question is why. In general, scholars warn against the potentially problematic ways in which invoking hate in explanatory variables can be reductive and depoliticising (Goldberg, 1995; Ross 2010). For example, the 1990s literature on “ancient hatreds” simplistically attributed ethnic conflicts and genocides to primal hate, overlooking broader affective dynamics, historical context, and socio-political factors and effectively naturalising ethnic violence (Ross, 2014). Additionally, the political stakes are higher and the topic more sensitive when discussing hate compared to fear due to its deeply (un)ethical and normative connotations. Nonetheless, the extensive body of literature on hate suggests that it holds significant analytical value that is yet to be fully realised.

Overall, that means that fear and hate are associated with political mobilisation and political violence, yet only the former has received extensive theoretical and analytical attention in the field of IR. Notably, Ross (2014, 18) warns that in political analysis emotion categories such as fear or hate in isolation “lack analytical leverage” because IR scholars are unlikely to investigate topics that “involve clear and distinct emotion types over time” and that instead attention should instead be given to broader affects. This article agrees with Ross that looking at a *singular* emotion obscures a lot of the complexity of the politics of emotions, thus suggesting interrogating the politics of fear *and* hate in (de)securitisation processes. However, it also disagrees with Ross’ dismissal of the analytic utility of emotion categories because, unlike Ross, this article does not seek to explain behaviour through individuals’ affective experiences. Instead, it focuses on how political actors at the macro-level construct claims about the affective experiences of others at the micro-level and examines the political implications of these claims. Simply put, political actors draw on common-sense understandings of fear and hate as distinct emotional states to make claims about others’ behaviour. They instrumentalise both emotions, explicitly and implicitly, to achieve political objectives. Thus, solely relying on the concept of affect risks imposing a scholastic and alien logic on political practice.[[2]](#footnote-2)

## Justifiable Fear and Vile Hate? Emotions and their functional and normative dimensions

To conceptualise why and how political actors at the macro-level instrumentalise fear and hate to make political claims about the affective experiences at the micro-level, it is helpful to examine how different strands of literature have discussed these emotions. Psychoanalytic theory posits that emotions and feelings always arise in complex compounds and clusters and whose interactions can generate political effects (see, for example, Cash 1989). Put differently, psychoanalytic theory suggests that anxiety, fear, and hate are distinct but inherently linked emotions that arise simultaneously in different constellations, never occur in isolation, and are always relational (Klein, 1975). The literature on the psychology of hate has likewise established links between fear, hate, and other emotions even though one might more prevalent than the other (Sternberg and Sternberg 2008). This close connection enables the politics of fear and hate that may contest which of these emotions is experienced and driving behaviour at the micro-level. Nonetheless, psychologically speaking fear and hate can be differentiated from other negative emotions on the basis of at least three criteria: appraisal patterns, action tendencies, and motivational goals (Fischer et al. 2018), a differentiation that also helps us to assess the implications of political claims about these emotions. In terms of appraisals, the emotion of hate is centred around the “innate nature, motives, and characteristics of the target”, including malicious intentions, as well as being immoral and potentially dangerous which is supplemented with feelings of lack of control and powerlessness (Fischer et al. 2018, 310–11). Fear is a response to an appraisal of an object as an existential threat that threatens to annihilate the self or a cherished object (Steimer 2002). Unlike fear, hate does not require an immediate threat to survival yet is nonetheless attached to a particular object, be it a person or group (Sternberg and Sternberg 2008). To use the example from the introduction, it is extremely unlikely that adult men are afraid of children from a minority group, yet they may very well hate children who belong to a minority. Thus, actors’ political claims may assert either that the perpetrator was driven by hate of a minority or that they were motivated by a broader fear of migration – each claim entails its own set of assumptions, normative judgments, and political implications.

Fear has a motivational goal of survival (Steimer 2002). Hate is more extreme in its motivation as its aim is “to ultimately eliminate or destroy the target, either mentally (humiliating, treasuring feelings of revenge), socially (excluding, ignoring), or physically (killing, torturing)” (Fischer et al. 2018, 311). In terms of action tendencies, fear is an adaptive response to particular behaviours and perceived threats and can decrease after the motivational goal is attained, whereas hate is more stable as it is associated with presumably innate traits of individuals and groups and might prevail until their destruction or annihilation (Fischer et al. 2018; Steimer 2002). Indeed, hate of others associated with collective trauma and victimhood can be shared over generations and influence interpretations of the present and future (Kinnvall 2004). Despite these differences, fear and hate can result in similar behavioural patterns as they can both incite violence and negative attitudes towards outgroup members – an ambiguity that opens space for political contestation about which of these two emotions is at work at the micro-level.

The sociological literature on hate similarly suggests that fear and hate emerge in combination with other emotions and furthermore posits that they are always social rather than mere responses to physical stimuli. In general, the sociological literature agrees on the importance of social context, relationships, and interactions between individuals in the emergence of emotions (see Bericat 2015 for an overview). Fear and hate are primarily relational, can only be understood within the social context in which they emerge and are experienced, and are typically accompanied by other emotions like humiliation, alienation, shame, anger, and rage, rather than in isolation (Bauman 2006; Kemper 1987; Scheff 2004) – a nuance that usually gets lost in political claims about fear and hate that group diverse feelings, emotions, and affects under a singular label. Sociological work has conceptualised fear both as emotion and as culture (Tudor 2003), arguing that in late modernity it is inescapable and structures everyday life and social relationships and merely fluctuates in intensity (Bauman 2006). Hate, in turn, has been conceptualised as an individual emotion that emerges as the result of unacknowledged shame and rage, as well as a cultural or “group” emotion where the shame/hate sequence is further associated with alienation and leads to the neutralisation of group norms opposing crime and violence (Scheff 2004). Importantly, the way that fear and hate are conceptualised, understood, and interpreted differs significantly in different contexts and so does their social expressions. Hochschild (1979, 564-666) developed the notion of “feeling rules” to denote how social structures stipulate for group members what they want to feel, what they ought to feel, and what they try to feel as well as how to express these feelings (or not) and how to interpret emotional displays of others. Crucially, these feeling rules are gendered and racialised, meaning they prescribe different emotional expectations and expressions to minoritised communities than to more privileged groups, thereby reinforcing power relations and societal hierarchies (Wingfield 2010). Emotions are not only social but deeply political and intertwined with power dynamics – dominant feeling rules often prohibit open expressions of fear (e.g., for men) and hate (e.g. of minorities) while encouraging others. That also means that differentiating between fear and hate is challenging in real-world scenarios in which social contexts may modify both their expressions and their interpretations. This, in turn, enables political contestation over what is being experienced, whether it is (in)appropriate, and whether this emotional experience and expression align with dominant feeling rules.

There are additional legal and normative dimensions that are important to consider, too. In purely legal terms, committing violence against another person is, generally speaking, a crime. It can, however, be permissible if the perpetrator acts out of fear (Simons 2008), but it is considered even more grave if committed out of hate (N. Hall 2013). In legal terms, some emotions, such as fear, are “reasonable” and acting on them may lead to reasonable action, including under certain circumstance, violence (Lee 2003). Indeed, the very experience of these emotions can be understood as a normative act and is subject the politics of emotions concerning “who gets to express emotions, [and] what emotions are perceived as (il)legitimate or (un)desirable” (Beattie, Eroukhmanoff, and Head 2019, 136). Those who “reasonably” fear may deserve empathy and understanding for their actions and protection against prosecution and what they perceive to be fearsome threats (Lee 2003). Those who hate are generally considered to be “unreasonable”, “ab-normal and un-usual”, and even “pathologically disturbed” (Goldberg, 1995, 269, 273) and others deserve protection from them.[[3]](#footnote-3) Put differently, those who fear are implicitly constructed as innocent and morally superior victims, whereas those who hate are ostracised as guilty and morally despicable perpetrators. To protect victims and punish those who act out of hate, many states have adopted the legal offences of hate crimes and hate speech. In this legislation, hate is not conceptualised as a singular emotional category driving a specific form of behaviour but rather as a cluster of intense negative feelings, biases, prejudices, beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts directed against a group identity (see, for example, N. Hall 2013). In line with this logic, when political actors explicitly invoke the emotion of hate to describe others, it may be used to label any of the aforementioned elements.

Having reviewed these diverse sets of literature, it is important to reiterate that this article interested in *political claims* about emotions on the macro-level of public discourse. To paraphrase T. H. Hall and Ross (2019: 1358), the article explores how “messy, diverse, and transient” affective experiences are discursively transformed into “coherent, shared, popular” singular emotions of fear and hate. The labels of fear and hate are powerful and politically consequential. The discussion above highlights that fear and hate are closely intertwined, are difficult to differentiate, and have vastly different social and normative connotations. These similarities and differences are important for political struggles about emotions to resonate – politicians, journalists, and ordinary citizens alike know about fear and hate, how they are expressed, and how (un)problematic and (un)desirable they are. For political claims about emotions to be(come) hegemonic, in other words, they need to be appropriate for the specific socio-political context and comply with dominant understandings of emotions, feeling rules, and societal expectations. There must also be plausibly observable embodied *experiences[[4]](#footnote-4)* at the micro-level that can be *(de)legitimised* or *(de)mobilised* at the macro-level.

## The *Gefühlspolitik* of Fear and Hate

The politics, or *Gefühlspolitik[[5]](#footnote-5)* (see Gellwitzki and Houde 2022)*,* of fear and hate is a particular form of securitisation conducted against the background of a general public mood[[6]](#footnote-6)that has several levels: At the macro-level, political actors are embedded in and influenced by collective affective dynamics (T. H. Hall and Ross 2015) but they nonetheless attempt to instrumentalise them to obtain their objectives (Gellwitzki and Houde 2022) and to compel others to feel and express certain emotions (Gustafsson and T. H. Hall 2021). These dynamics, in turn, directly impinge on the micro-level (Beattie, Eroukhmanoff, and Head 2019) yet widespread affective dynamics at the micro-level might also engender macro-level changes and responses to address emotional needs of the population (Mavelli 2017). In other words, the discursive strategies employed at the macro-level may contribute to shaping embodied experiences at the micro-level which can influence the general public mood and, reversely, abrupt shifts in embodied experiences at the micro-level and public moods may lead to new or shifting strategies at the macro-level. Simply put, the *Gefühlspolitik* of fear and hate takes the form of actors attempting to instrumentalise emotions by discursively interpreting the conduct of others as fearful or hateful and stipulating how one ought to feel about and act on them. This way, the *Gefühlspolitik* of fear and hate connects affective experiences at the micro-level with the macro-level of public discourse.

At the macro-level fear and hate are often invoked by political actors. But why these two emotions? Based on the literature, this article suggests that there is a particular set of circumstances that makes these two emotions particularly interesting for actors: Fear and hate are inextricably linked, possess significant potential for political mobilisation, and are often experienced simultaneously yet they have distinct social, political and ethical implications. In political contexts they are difficult to differentiate by mere observation which renders it possible for actors to ascribe one or the other to themselves or others as a means to (de)mobilise audiences and (de)legitimise certain positions. Simply put, actors can and often do quite easily label the same act of political violence as either fear-induced action of self-defence of an anxious population or as the hateful crime of a morally inferior extremist, depending on what best fits their political agenda. Moreover, both emotions have strong mobilising potential as they are associated with extreme behaviour that allows actors to garner support and implement otherwise inconceivable measures. There are of course, limitations. Political actors cannot simply instil an aethereal fear or hate in their purportedly passive audiences (Eroukhmanoff 2020). Instead, they can try to harness and stir broader affective dynamics and compress them into particular socially recognisable emotions (Van Rythoven and Solomon 2020). Crucially, at the level of political discourse all invocations of such social, group, or popular emotions are always inevitably political and politically consequential (Eroukhmanoff 2020; T. H. Hall and Ross 2019; Ross 2010), both reflective and (re)productive of collective affective dynamics.

The politics of fear and hate can then take at least five socially thick forms of strategic action that instrumentalise emotions as tools of (de)securitisation: a) “Fear mongering”: actors invoke and stir fear about others/objects to mobilise populations, legitimise the implementation emergency measures, and declare something an existential threat; b) “accusing”: actors ascribe hate or fear to others such as political opponents to delegitimise their positions and demobilise populations that support them; these emotional others might even be constructed as threats to the self (see also Abu-Bakare 2022; Bilgic 2018; Bilgic et al. 2019; Eroukhmanoff 2020; Ross 2010); c); “excusing”: actors deliberately legitimise hateful and violent behaviour and implicitly mobilise support for it by discursively constructing it as fearful, which depoliticises and deprives perpetrators of agency and accountability, potentially even blaming victims for causing fear in others; and d) “condemning”: actors deliberately delegitimise negative feelings and expressions by discursively constructing them as hateful in order to distance self and in-group from and demobilise certain positions. Condemning may come in conjunction with accusing, but condemning is about enforcing feeling rules in the in-group and is a preventive measure and deterrence against unthinkable and unreasonable emotions that may emerge in the future to defend the in-group from its destructive impulses.[[7]](#footnote-7) Simply put, there is a difference in emphasis and nuance between “accusing” and “condemning,” with the former targeting and constructing an out-group, while the latter is directed at the in-group. Crucially, these four forms of strategic action are ways in which actors *explicitly* draw attention to particular issues. However, they always *implicitly* entail a fifth form of strategic action, that is e) “obscuring”: the silence on and neglection of lived experiences and feelings of certain groups that are deemed normal and politically inconsequential. This way, certain issues are concealed, distracted from, and downplayed and actors implicitly suggest what practices and whose actions are to be considered natural, normal, and apolitical and thus do not need to be (de)legitimised or (de)mobilised around and also whose feelings ultimately do not matter. In the context of security, this may be different forms of normalised, routinised, and bureaucratic practices and forms of structural violence targeting migrants, women, and other minoritised communities (see, for example, Innes 2023).

Table 1: Five socially thick strategies of the politics of fear and hate

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Strategic action | Whose feelings matter | Ascribed feeling | Objective | Discursive means |
| 1. Fear mongering | Self/in-group | Fear | Securitisation.  Legitimise and promote negative feelings on an issue to mobilise the population for support for the implementation of emergency measures | (Re)construct a homogenous (fearing) in-group identity; construct an other as an existential threat and object of fear |
| 1. Accusing | Other/out-group | Hate/fear | (De)securitisation.  Delegitimise negative feelings and demobilise the population around an issue | Desecuritise a particular issue in conjunction with constructing (and sometimes securitising) a hateful other |
| 1. Excusing | Self/in-group | Fear/anxiety | Securitisation.  Legitimise negative feelings and implicitly condone hateful behaviour and violent action against an other; mobilise the population around an issue | Secure the self/in-group’s positive self-conception, justify, and rationalise hate and hateful behaviour |
| 1. Condemning | Self/in-group | Hate | Descuritisation.  Delegitimise negative feelings and demobilise the population around an issues | Distance the self or in-group from certain behaviours and positions; protect the self/in-group against its own negative impulses |
| 1. Obscuring | - | None | Depoliticisation.  Silencing, and/or repressing certain feelings; normalising the status quo and certain forms of violence | Neglecting and downplaying certain feelings and/or feelings of certain groups |

The different shades of *Gefühlspolitik* may overlap in practice. However, it is nonetheless analytically insightful to explore what actors ascribe which emotion to what group of people, whose emotions are prioritised and argued to deserve consideration, and how the relationality of the invoked emotions is constructed. This highlights the need to not only explore the construction of emotions of the self (that is anxious/fearful or hateful) but also how emotions are constructed about and attached to the other (that is fearful or hateful). The following section will illustrate the analytical utility of this typology by looking at the German attempts to deal with right-wing extremist violence and the emergence of the far-right populist party AFD during the so-called migration crisis.

## The Politics of Emotions in Germany during the so-called migrations crisis

There is a burgeoning research agenda that explores how affectivity has influenced the German political and popular responses to the so-called migration crisis between April 2015 and March 2016. Initially, the German government refrained from securitising the issue of migration and even euphorically implemented the so-called open-door policy (Dingott Alkopher 2018; Gellwitzki 2022; Pinkerton 2019) before adopting more restrictive measures and an overtly racialised securitisation discourse after the sexual assaults on women in Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2015/2016 (Gazit 2018; Holzberg and Raghavan 2020; Lemay 2021). Indeed, this volatility was not restricted to government policy but also reflected in media discourse and the populations’ openness towards asylum seekers that both remained largely positive throughout 2015 but significantly changed after New Year’s Eve (Lemay 2021; Vollmer and Karakayali 2018; Wigger, Yendell, and Herbert 2022). Following these insights, the rest of the empirical section is divided into two, the time period of “openness” towards asylum seekers in 2015 and the decline of this “openness” in 2016 (see Lemay 2021). The focus is on the *Gefühlpolitik* at the macro-level, that is the construction of fear and hate in public discourse, and how actors adapt their strategies in response to perceived changes of affective experiences at the micro-level.

### The Politics of Fear and Hate in Times of Openness

Throughout 2015, there was a notable absence of the invocations of fear and the securitisation of migration at the macro-level of public discourse. Despite the asylum seeker-friendly elite and media discourses and the generally positive attitudes towards asylum seekers in the population (Lemay 2021) there was nonetheless a substantial increase in far-right extremist violence (Frey 2020). Indeed, between 2013 and 2015, the number of attacks against asylum seeker homes increased 18-fold (Frey 2020).

In official discourse, political actors engaged in the strategic actions of “accusing” and “condemning” to demobilise the population around far-right positions and to delegitimise violence and anti-asylum seeker sentiments. Throughout 2015, government politicians denounced far-right violence and anti-asylum seeker sentiments in the strongest possible terms. Statements by politicians, moreover, often ascribed negative emotions, be it irrational fears or plain hate to the perpetrators. At the same time, they called for the population to refrain from expressing anti-migration sentiments, adopting far-right positions, and distance themselves from those deemed hateful. Examples are plenty. On August 31st, German Chancellor Angela Merkel gave the traditional summer press conference of the federal government. Merkel (2015a) addressed “those who, for whatever reason, go to [xenophobic] demonstrations” and told them “Do not follow those who call for such demonstrations! Too often there are prejudices, too often there is coldness, even hate in their hearts. Keep your distance!”. She also implored to not “follow those who, with coldness or even hate in their hearts, claim being-German for themselves alone and want to exclude others” at her annual New Year’s speech (Merkel 2015b). German President Joachim Gauck highlighted that “that it is crystal clear that violence and hatred are not legitimate forms of debate. Arson and attacks on defenceless people [=asylum seekers] deserve our contempt and should be punished” (*Deutsche Welle* 2015). Minister of justice Heiko Maas (SPD) stated in an interview that “stone throw attacks on helpers of the German red cross, arson attacks on refugee homes – I am ashamed of the hate against foreigners on German streets” (Kleine 2015). On a different occasion, he insisted that the silent majority of the population must “speak out decisively so that our societal debate is not poisoned by incitement and hate” (*Die Zeit* 2015). In sum, in official discourse, political actors routinely ascribed hate and other negatively normatively charged emotions to those who committed violence against asylum seekers, as well as to those who demonstrated against them, implicitly and explicitly imploring the population not to side with those who hate.

This closely intertwined politics of “accusing” and “condemning” was mirrored by media discourse. As one study exploring mainstream media outlets put it, especially in August and September 2015 “[h]ardly any comment […] attempted to differentiate between right-wing extremists, politically unsettled [individuals], and concerned citizens who felt marginalised” (Haller 2017, 135). All these positions were equally delegitimised and condemned as hateful and xenophobic. They were not only discursively constructed as hateful, however, but also as existential threats to German state and society. As German President Gauck remarked during his visit at an asylum seeker home, “there is a bright Germany that shines here [at the asylum seeker home] compared to the dark Germany that we feel when we hear of attacks on asylum seekers’ accommodations or even xenophobic actions against human beings” (‘Besuch Einer Berliner Flüchtlingsunterkunft’ 2015). The invoked colour scheme is not only morally and normatively charged, but was also reproduced in the media, arguing that it was up to every single citizen to decide what country they wanted to live in (see, for example, *Der Spiegel* 2015b). As the newsmagazine Spiegel put it, Germany had a “growing hate problem” and was experiencing “a new culture of hate” and “rampant hatred” as “people [felt] entirely uninhibited about expressing their hatred and xenophobia” (*Der Spiegel* 2015c). The hate against asylum seekers and those helping them, in other words, was argued to not only threaten asylum seekers themselves but also contemporary Germany as a whole, delegitimising the public expression of anti-refugee sentiments and demobilising citizens around far-right positions. Indeed, research has even suggested that the substantial pro-refugee movement and political mobilisation of volunteers was only possible because of the hateful far-right extremist violence (Mavelli 2017 Zehfuss 2021). This pro-refugee movement mobilised millions of citizens and was widely promoted and supported by government and media, which can be interpreted as a rather successful form of both accusing and condeming that widely resonated with the public and through which an idealised German self was neatly separated from a hateful other (Gellwitzki 2022). Overall, the politics of ascribing normatively charged negative emotions to anti-asylum seeker protests and perpetrators of political violence also narrowed down space for political manoeuvre whilst necessitating action against the threat the hateful other posed.

From the German perspective, the so-called “border opening” and the implementation of the so-called “open-door policy” are usually narrated as the most significant event of 2015 and a pivotal turning point during the so-called migration crisis (Zehfuss 2021). Its aftermath was not only characterised by a public mood of euphoria, but also by the re-invigoration of the Alternative for Germany (AFD) that transformed into an outright far-right populist party. This rise in popularity of a far-right party was controversially debated. In public discourse, both government and opposition politicians frequently engaged in strategic action of “accusing” the AFD of fear- and hate-mongering to delegitimise their political agenda and demobilise support for their positions. Vice-chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, for example, referred to the AFD as “agitators” and “dangerous arsonists” (Bielicki and Hickmann 2015). At a different occasion, Gabriel referred to the AFD as “openly far-right radical” and Minister of Justice Maas “hostile to democracy” (Leber 2015). Right-wing extremists and the AFD alike, in other words, were labelled as hateful as well as potentially existential and fearsome threat to contemporary Germany. However, despite these efforts, the AFD rapidly grew in popularity. Whilst it had polled at only 4% in July 2015 it reached 10% by December (infratest dimap 2015), a significant number and the highest for any far-right party every recorded in the Federal Republic of Germany until that point in time.

The AFD, in turn, engaged in the strategic action of “fear mongering”. It declared an “Autumn Offensive 2015” during which it hosted “information evening rallies, and demonstrations” in all of Germany in which it campaigned against “asylum chaos” and “unbridled immigration” (Geiges 2018). During this campaign, AFD far-right populists notably engaged in the politics of emotions by stoking fears, resentments, and arguably hate against asylum seekers as well as elites at the micro-level. The central narrative of the “offensive” was that the situation in Germany was “dramatic and chaotic” to an extent that it threatened the “total cultural and political decline of Germany” as the government was argued to act against the will of the people and ally themselves with the asylum seekers against “the people” (Geiges 2018, 65). AFD vice-chairman Gauland, for instance, claimed that Germany would face a “catastrophe” if no political change would occur as Germany could not cope with “migration of peoples” (Middelhoff 2015). Björn Höcke, chairman of the AFD in Thuringia, openly utilised vocabulary reminiscent of the Nazi era, imploring at a rally to defend “one-thousand-year Germany” and calling for a “resistance movement against the further erosion of Germany’s sovereignty and identity” (Hauser 2015). As many observers argued, the stoking of hate became increasingly successful in the in autumn 2015 when the anti-asylum seeker rhetoric mobilised a “mixed scene of ‘normal citizens’, PEGIDA, internet racists, hooligans, NPD[[8]](#footnote-8) and neo-Nazis” (Jansen 2015). Crucially, the invoked “enemies” were not “only refugees, Muslims, and migrants, but also democratic politicians and proponents of [pro-refugee] ‘welcome culture’, who [were] allegedly plunging Germany into multicultural chaos” (Jansen and Müller-Neuhof 2015).

At the same time, at the macro-level of public discourse AFD politicians engaged in the strategic action of “excusing” by labelling negative feelings as legitimate concerns, fears, and anxieties rather than hate. This notably included legitimising violence and extreme far-right positions. Chairwoman Frauke Petry argued that hate in society was the “symptom of a non-existent debate” on the refugee question which was widely interpreted as a justification of violence against asylum seekers (Leber 2015). Deputy chairman Gauland attended a rally of the xenophobic PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident) in Dresden and later stated that he only saw “completely normal citizens” there and after an arson attack against an asylum seeker home he condemned the attack but argued that ultimately the government who did not take the citizens’ concerns seriously was to blame (Amann et al. 2015). Hate and violence, thus, were either utterly denied or, if acknowledged, ascribed to external factors that effectively deprived perpetrators of agency. After all, since asylum seekers were argued to constitute existential threats to the German state and German society, almost all means to combat this threat were legitimate in the eyes of the AFD and other far-right actors.

### The Politics of Fear and Hate in Times of declining Openness

A radical shift in the politics of emotions occurred after New Year’s Eve when in the city of Cologne several hundred women were subjected to sexual assaults that were primarily linked “to racialized men from the Middle East and northern Africa” (Holzberg and Raghavan 2020, 1189). The entirety of public discourse changed and large parts of it became openly xenophobic and racist (see, for example, Holzberg and Raghavan 2020; Vollmer and Karakayali 2018; Wigger, Yendell, and Herbert 2022). As one observer put it at the time, after the events of Cologne “the anger, the insecurity, the fear, but above all the hate and resentment […] broke their way through the ramparts of decency, restraint, and humanity” (Boie 2016). At the micro-level, New Year’s Eve ignited “a wave of hate” against asylum seekers and violence “skyrocketed to unprecedented heights, with the rate of attacks not returning to pre-NYE levels for the reminder of 2016” (Frey 2020, 696, 695).

At the macro-level, government and media discourse shifted towards a *Gefühlspolitik* of fear-mongering that pushed for the securitisation of migration. In this discourse, migration and migrants, not only asylum seekers, were constructed as existential, racialised, hypersexualised, and fearsome threats to German society, culture, and the state (see, for example, Dietze 2016; Dziuba-Kaiser and Rott 2016; Köttig and Sigl 2020). Vivid examples included a *Focus* magazine cover featuring a naked white woman with black handprints on her body and a Süddeutsche Zeitung cover illustration showing a silhouette of a white woman's lower body against a black background, with a black hand positioned between her legs (Boulila and Carri 2017). This radical shift in public discourse was accompanied by a *Gefühlspolitik* of excusing, perhaps best epitomised by President Gauck’s (in)famous speech at Davos Summit in January where he argued that “fear has grown that basic civilizational achievements such as tolerance, respect and equal rights for women could be impaired. So has the fear […] that the state is not always and everywhere able to ensure law and order. These uncertainties and concerns call for convincing answers […]”. Therefore, Gauck claimed, politicians needed to “combine the citizen’s interest in the continued existence of a functioning community with the human approach of helping those in need of protection” which may entail the development and enforcement of “limitation strategies” which can “be morally and politically necessary in order to maintain the state’s ability to act. It can also be necessary to secure the support of the majority of society for a humane reception of refugees […] limitation is not per se unethical: limitation helps to gain acceptance”.

The government’s strategic *Gefühlspolitik*, in other words, had begun focusing on the German self’s experience of fears, blaming asylum seekers for these fears, and the political implications arising from these fears. These implications were argued to be crystal clear: restricting migration, tightening migration laws and laws governing sexual offences, and forcing migrants to assimilate into German society and culture. What had previously been argued to be hateful and morally deplorable demands and rhetoric was now partially adopted by government and media that seemingly attempted to find a rhetoric that was adequate to what was generally believed to be the public mood. Indeed, *anticipation* of affective dynamics at the micro-level became a key aspect of the government’s politics of emotions as officials attempted to address anxieties they believed might have been elicited by the events in Cologne. As some newspapers claimed, the government’s efforts to restrict migration were driven by their fear of the populations’ (potential) fears (see, for example, Brost 2016; Schulte 2016; Thimm 2016). In their seeming attempt to address the emotional needs of the population, the government invoked and constructed migrants as objects of fears which arguably legitimised, circulated, and (re)produced them as fearsome objects in the first place. The shift in the politics of emotions ultimately culminated in law and policy reforms that would curtail the rights of asylum seekers (Werthschulte 2017) and the EU-Turkey deal which effectively ended migration into the EU via Turkey (see Squire 2020).

Even though the government seemingly adopted many of their policy propositions, the AFD and other far-right actors did not cease to engage in the politics of emotions through fear-mongering. Instead, they continued attempting to stoke and instrumentalise fear by further antagonising and constructing both the government and asylum seekers as existential threats. Indeed, their rhetoric became even more extreme and transgressive than before. Björn Höcke, chairman of the AFD in Thuringia, for example, claimed on social media that the events in Cologne gave Germany “a foretaste of the impending collapse of culture and civilization. Hundreds of women became victims of a group of 1.000(!) young North African men” (Baumgärtner et al. 2016). Chairwoman Frauke Petry, in turn, compared the events in Cologne with the rape of German women by Soviet soldiers at the end of WWII (Weiland 2016) and argued that the German border must be closed, if necessary with force and by shooting at women and children (Schmidt 2016). AFD and other far-right actors, in other words, framed the events in Cologne and immigration more generally in terms of hypersexualised and racialised strangers violating passive German victims to legitimise and mobilise fears of the foreign. Furthermore, the references to collective memory and trauma can inject emotions from the past into the present and thus further emotionalise public discourses (Ross 2014). Ultimately, the AFD gained major electoral success both at the state and national level (see Dostal 2017) whilst the government adopted far-reaching anti-migration legislation, illustrating that they were ultimately partially successful in their politics of emotions.

Notably, the politics of emotions after New Year’s Eve exposed forms of violence previously concealed and obscured others that were salient before. As many feminists pointed out at the time, sexual assaults and violence at large festivities and gender-based violence more generally were a structural, if mostly ignored, problem in Germany long before the New Year’s Eve in Cologne (see, for example, Stokowski 2016). After that, it suddenly became framed as a fearsome threat brought to Germany by Arab and Muslim migrants (Dietze 2016). The conservative-led government had refused to fully ratify the Istanbul Convention[[9]](#footnote-9) the previous year but after New Year’s Eve was suddenly pushing for its full implementation (Kölbel 2021), particularly emphasising the “no means no” principle, to protect German women from racialised strangers. Reversely, the previously widely debated violence against asylum seeker homes was now often downplayed as the deeds of a negligibly small, if hateful, minority that was condemned but not framed as a threat to German society and state anymore. The tightening of migration laws, their intertwining with the laws governing sexual offences to lower the threshold for deportations (see Holzberg and Raghavan 2020), and the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal furthermore constituted new forms of structural violence that were certainly fear- and anxiety-inducing for asylum seekers. However, this was not debated through the lens of the politics of fear and hate anymore, thus neglecting asylum seeker’s feelings and obscuring this form of structural violence as a normal feature of the state apparatus. Put differently, the politics of fear in public discourse had paved the way for the securitisation of migration, discursively linking it to sexual violence in the process. This enabled policy reforms to address previously depoliticised gender-based structural violence. However, it also resulted in enacting and obscuring structural state violence against asylum seekers while downplaying direct violence against asylum seekers by far-right extremists.

## Conclusion

Emotions are powerful tools in public discourse that are often invoked by political actors to further their political objectives. In the context of migration, scholars of critical security studies have thus far predominantly focused on fear. This article, however, suggested that a stronger focus on fears’ “dark twin” hate will generate novel insights on the politics of emotions surrounding securitisation dynamics. It highlighted how invocations of hate enable different forms of emergency politics, (de)legitimise certain positions, and (de)mobilise populations and demonstrated how these dynamics played out in Germany during the so-called migration crisis. Crucially, the politics of fear and hate are neither unique to Germany nor do they solely pertain to issues relating to migration and the far-right. Following Hamas’ attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, governments across Europe and North America engaged in the politics of fear and hate to support Israel’s invasion and occupation of Gaza, delegitimise Pro-Palestinian sentiments, protestors, and demonstrations, and demobilise public support for the Palestinian cause. Examples are plenty. Former British Home secretary Suella Braverman denounced pro-Palestinian demonstrations in London as “hate marches” and incited far-right demonstrations and violence near the Cenotaph on Armistice Day (Thomas and Syal 2023). Police cracked down on pro-Palestine demonstrations across US campuses amidst accusations that they were antisemitic and hateful (Angel 2024). The list goes on. The politics of fear and hate, in other words, are not only effective ways to (de)legitimise, and (de)mobilise but may also entail far-reaching and unintended political implications that are not only divisive and polarising but potentially even subverting liberal democracies even though they are often supposedly employed in its very defence.

The article also raises questions about the ways in which researchers themselves are engaging in the politics of emotions. Indeed, researchers are instrumental (re)producing the social and political worlds (see Aradau and Huysmans 2014). Disentangling different emotions and isolating their effects is not only an arduous task, it can also lead to reductionism and the negligence of less clearly defined but politically consequential affective dynamics (Eroukhmanoff 2020; Ross 2014; Solomon 2013). Nonetheless, research also suggests the analytical utility of focusing on singular emotions, in particular in the context of securitisation dynamics and the politics of security (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020; Van Rythoven 2015). In either case, scholars make decisions in their research design to focus on someone’s affective experiences in relation to something or someone else, highlighting some affective dynamics while obscuring others. That means they make decisions regarding whose emotions matter (Beattie, Eroukhmanoff, and Head 2019), but also how they are to be understood. Simply put, research designs on the politics of emotions may explore the same empirical case but focus on how actors channel broader anxieties, stoke fears, or promote hate, respectively. Alternatively, they may even interpret the same political behaviour as either fear- or hate-induced and thus implicitly (de)legitimise and normatively condemn or condone certain discourses and actions. This relates to a broader question of how we treat emotions. In this article, I have approached emotions in terms of “political claims” about their experience, legitimacy and implications for political (de)mobilisation. Based on the psychological literature, we may also approach emotions in terms of “truth claims” about the actual emotional lives of individuals at the micro-level or the sort of emotions that political actors at the macro-level implicitly or explicitly invoke. We may also approach emotions as motivation and explore how fear and hate drive the behaviour of actors.

Looking forward, there are many avenues for future research. The socially thick strategies discussed in this article are certainly not exhaustive, and further research is needed to investigate the various ways in which fear and hate can be instrumentalised. In far-right circles, for example, fear may also be used to delegitimise behaviour deemed “weak” or “cowardly,” while hatred of certain groups might be seen as socially legitimate and even desirable. In Germany, for example, the neo-Nazi party NPD regularly attempts to mobilise the population by advocating capital punishment for paedophiles. Moreover, the example of hate furthermore raise the question of the analytic utility and value of a further expansion of the politics of fear and hate to include other often invoked emotions such as anger. Does anger shape securitisation dynamics differently than fear and hate, and if so how? Other pertinent questions include whether the realisation that hate plays a crucial role in securitisation processes should be reason to rethink our understanding of desecuritisation processes? What exactly is the role of hate in processes of psychological (de)securitisation? What are the policy implications if we acknowledge that the securitisation of migration is not (only) driven by fear? In other words, there are plenty of avenues for future research that will allow researchers to generate more detailed understandings of the *Gefühlspolitik* of fear and hate at macro- and micro-levels of analysis.

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1. When this article invokes the concept of violence, it refers to direct forms of violence unless specified otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I thank reviewer 1 for this formulation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This presupposes a liberal democratic setting in times of peace. In authoritarian contexts or times of war, hating an enemy may of course very well be considered “reasonable”, socially accepted, or even stipulated through feeling rules. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In the context of this article, the question is not whether individuals genuinely experience fear, hate, or another emotion, but rather whether these observable experiences can be plausibly and convincingly characterised as fear or hate by political actors. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The notion of *Gefühlspolitik* challenges the often implicit assumption that actors can instrumentalise emotions while remaining “unemotional” and unaffected by collective affective dynamics. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A public mood refers to collective affective dynamics experienced by but not reducible to individuals that transcend traditional levels of analysis and influencing individuals’ embodied experiences, perception, priorities, attention, behaviour, and normative appraisals (see Hall and Ross 2015; Gellwitzki 2022; Rumelili 2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On distancing more generally see Van Rythoven 2021 and Eroukhmanoff 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The NPD is the largest neo-Nazi political party in Germany. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence is a human rights treaty of the Council of Europe. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)