

**Sanctions and the affective politics of vulnerability: the
Iranian national imaginary in a time of crisis**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the emotional politics around the US-led economic sanctions on Iran, within a theoretical framework informed by feminist studies of affect and emotion. My research centres on the affective narratives generated and circulated on Iranian social media around imaginings of Iran as a suffering nation, and understands mediated articulations of pain, rage, despair and hope as also imbricated in local and global discourses of politicised emotions. It focuses on the affective repertoires generated on the Farsi Facebook pages of Javad Zarif, the Iranian foreign minister, and of BBC Persian, during the 2013-15 sanctions negotiations between Iran and the 'P5+1' (UN Security Council plus Germany).

I explore how sanctions have been felt and produced as crisis, that of an exceptional precarity, towards which the national imaginary was oriented. I contend that a new discursive genre of compassion, linked to 'recognition' of people's suffering under sanctions, was generated around the Rouhani presidency in 2013, and worked as a counter to a perceived denial of empathy in both global and local discourses on sanctions. The intimacy that the public constructed around the figure of Zarif, as representing the newly 'compassionate state', permitted the exposure and staging of the nation as vulnerable. In turn, these online articulations of vulnerability played a role in shaping the national imaginary, through the construction categories of 'us' - those empathising with suffering - and a non-compassionate 'them' - Western powers and the Iranian ruling class.

In mapping the mobilisation of affect and its role in the constitution of sanctions as crisis, I argue that affective-discursive formations on Iranian social media should be understood in terms of the differential and transnational allocation of empathy and of grievability, where some bodies are deemed to be more grievable and hence more deserving of empathy than others. I argue that the discourse of *counter-compassion* operating during the Obama administration, which imposed and propelled the harsh US and UN sanctions from 2010, functioned as a component of an affective regime of governmentality which excluded Iran and Iranian bodies from the frame of the proximate and trustworthy, those whose suffering could be regarded as grievable. Yet in contesting both national and transnational regimes of grievability, Iranian online commentators develop their own counter-discourses, which mobilise new and old forms of national distinctiveness. Thus, I argue, fluid online publics are constituted precisely through the affective regimes of counter-compassion which play upon the national body.

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Sanctions and the affective politics of vulnerability : the Iranian national imaginary in a time of crisis

Introduction

It was 2013, in the midst of the latest sanctions regime, with an escalating emotional intensity surrounding the new round of negotiations between Iran and the ‘P5+1’ countries (US, UK, France, China, Russia, plus Germany). All of this had just coincided with the Iranian presidential election of 14 June, and the victory of the moderate candidate Hassan Rouhani. Some time into a seemingly friendly conversation with a white, well-to-do European male journalist, who I later understood worked for the *Financial Times*, I felt a rampant anger, combined with a sense of vulnerability, which perplexed me for long afterwards. Aided by a sarcastic not-sure-if-you-know-enough smile, which served to mediate his determinedly unfeeling and disbelieving stance, he rejected the notion that the sanctions on Iran were hitting ordinary people and causing actual suffering, depriving them from life-saving drugs, and even clean air, and were leading to the slashing of salaries and of employment. Smiling and looking at me talking about the devastating air pollution and the soaring level of diagnoses of a colourful range of diseases, from severe asthma to heart failure and lung cancer, which was to a great degree to do with Iran being unable to import clean petrol as it used to, he denied with professional fierceness any significant impact on ordinary lives, and characterised my narratives of suffering as ‘sentimental’, emotional, and based on ‘insufficiently founded claims’. I feel that I was not so much upset at the sarcasm in his remarks, as the fact that my and ‘our’ very personal, embodied and affective experiences, our endurance of pain and vulnerability, were dismissed or deemed

dubious, almost in their entirety, and branded ultimately as insufficient. I still remember how I desperately tried to explain and ‘prove’ the existence of what was commonly felt and discussed in Iranians’ ordinary and everyday conversations about sanctions as ‘the depressed nation’ - *Mellat e affsordeh*.

Reflecting on this episode, I came to a realisation. In the course of researching people’s comments on social media, I had felt part of this ‘public’; I felt close to the group; I empathised. Social media is affective, and affecting!¹ Here, the key question for me became: what are the relations between embodiment, emotionality and the discourses around sanctions? Western media and politicians have tended to focus exclusively on the economic and geopolitical aspects of sanctions on Iran, their effectivity or otherwise in bringing Iran to the negotiating table, and the future of Iran’s nuclear programme, at the expense of sidelining the bodily effects of sanctions. I have sought to frame an alternative point of departure which foregrounds sanctioned bodies as suffering. Specifically, I focus on the emotional modes that Iranians under the regime of sanctions have found to articulate their suffering in relation to their own lives and to world politics, mainly through social media comments on news stories. Yet I could not readily situate these comments in terms of what I encountered in the existing scholarship. These transient refrains and choruses, which seemed to channel feelings of mourning, hope and despair, interspersed with witty, sarcastic and/or angry putdowns, and more than a few vivid personal testimonies, could not be straightforwardly related to online and offline spheres of political activism. The often highly affective forms and

¹ Brian Massumi defines affect in very broad terms as ‘an ability to affect and be affected’ (Massumi, 1987, p.xvi). These definitions are discussed in Chapter One.

content of the comments did little to suggest the existence of a classic deliberative public.

What struck me in my encounter with the journalist was the intimate link between the emotional intensity I experienced and the affective modes I was tracking on Facebook. In order to put my own subjective reactions in perspective, it was important to ask what relation they bore to what I deemed to be a denial of empathy that had been felt and reflected on by Iranian citizens on social media, which I saw as related to the discourses and doings both of their own government, and of Western and international bodies. What this brings to the surface is what Judith Butler refers to as the differential distribution of grievability, where ‘grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters’ (2010, p.14). ‘Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear’ (ibid.). In other words, there is a differential evaluation of loss and injury when it comes to the question of which lives are worth protecting.

The argument of this research centres on the ways in which sanctions have been framed as crisis. I am not simply referring to the economic and social consequences of sanctions, their very real, material effects on people’s lives (Gordon, 2010, 2013; Moret, 2015). Rather, I explore how sanctions have been felt and *produced* as crisis, and how this crisis is politically and affectively articulated at both local and transnational levels. In the framing of sanctions as *affective crisis* in the Iranian national imaginary, they appear as constituted as *exceptional precarity*. It is, I argue, within this framework of emotional politics that Hassan Rouhani managed to win the presidency in June 2013; he was understood to have acknowledged and empathised with the suffering of recent years, which had previously been disavowed or repudiated. It was the

acknowledgement of this exceptional precarity that generated a space within which sanctions could be delimited and narrated within genres of suffering and pain and hope - for the lifting of sanctions and an opening towards the 'good life' (Berlant, 2011). In this approach, then, experiences of sanctions do not simply produce affects and emotions as their result; rather, sanctions are constituted in and through mediated affects.

Within this context, I seek to conceptualise how economic sanctions on Iran are mediated through the affective discursive practices of Iranians on social media, which are intertwined with and reflect on transnational politics, in ways that give shape to and are shaped by the national imaginary. My approach concentrates on exploring the imbrication of the historical and the ordinary (Berlant, 2008a, 2011) in the ways in which crisis is narrated, its genres of narration on social media, and what this tells us about the relationship of Iranian citizens to the metapolitical at state and transnational levels. Both local and global governments were perceived by the Iranian public to have withheld empathy for the suffering and loss caused, directly or indirectly, by sanctions. Thus this relationship can be understood, I argue, through analysing how affect may be deployed as forms of biopolitical governmentality, in other words, how affect is deployed in the governance of populations through regimes of representation that distinguish between grievable lives that are worthy of empathy and ungrivable lives that are situated as not so deserving (Butler, 2010; Butler et al, 2016; Pedwell, 2014).

Research Contribution: political emotions, social media and the national imaginary

This study is a contribution to the study of affect and emotion in the sphere of politics and to the scholarship on online social media in the Middle East. There has recently been increased interest in the topic of emotion and politics (for example, Demertzis, ed., 2013; Heaney and Flam, ed., 2014; Hoggett and Thompson, ed. 2012; Hutchison, 2014, 2016) and ‘political emotions’ have been conceptualised as a way of denoting the essential role affect plays in politics; yet although there are a number of studies in political psychology and sociological literature, the concept still requires theoretical elaboration in tandem with case study research. Moreover, studies of the interrelation of affect, politics and social media, both in the region, and more generally, have tended to focus mainly on heightened moments of political protest rather than on ‘ordinary’ or everyday life.

I thus seek to map out the relation between crisis and the national imaginary, which in turn means elaborating a set of theoretical and methodological tools for analysing the affective modes of narrative which generate sanctions as crisis. This involves bringing the everyday into the study of historical events, studying the affective interrelations between ordinary people and governments, and between local and global levels, as they appear in affective-discursive online practices (Wetherell, 2012). In the recent academic scholarship, as I suggested above, the relations between emotions and politics in the contexts of everyday life have often been neglected. In setting out an alternative approach, I draw particularly on feminist and postcolonial scholarship as it engages with affect, and social media. In particular, I explore the intimate and complex narrations of

the historical in ordinary life, through analysing emotionally charged online comments on BBC Farsi news stories on sanctions, and on the Facebook page of the Iranian foreign minister, Javad Zarif. This project therefore seeks to explore the intertwining of emotions and politics in order to develop a conceptual framework for the study of social media in the Middle East in the time of crisis.

In this approach I draw on Lauren Berlant's conceptualisation of the *historical present*, as creation of the sensorium that feels and intuits history, and gives back to the present its density (Berlant, 2011), rather than focusing on framing the time of the present in the rational, *post hoc* terms of the historian, after the present has been delimited as past. To analyse Farsi Facebook comments on sanctions is to map how it might feel to experience sanctions as history, and it is in this context that I construe the online comment streams during the sanction negotiations as case studies for understanding how the Iranian national imaginary is structured and shaped.

This research thus places itself at the intersection of the affective and the political, the particular and the collective, and explores the nuances and complexities emerging from and arising within them. It has invested in an effort to understand affect in its relation to the contemporary embodied geographies of feelings, where personal, civic, and national identities and imaginaries encounter each other and merge. I thus identify and analyse the emotional and affective framings by and through which Iranians reflect on their precarious lives in this 'extended present', in relation to fragile dreams of a 'good life' (Berlant, 2011).

It is my contention in this thesis, then, that an affective analysis of sanctions on Iran permits one to unfold how 'ordinary citizenship' (Berlant, 1997) makes sense of and is

simultaneously shaped by the time of crisis. The sanctions of 2010, following on from the repression of the 2009 Green movement, seem to have brought on a layered sense of despair and bewilderment, which marked the national body as prone to injury. The consequent loss of hope in established politics, and the mourning for lost and injured lives, I argue, should be analysed as intersected and intertwined with the construction of a rather unique mode of hopefulness which arose, rather unexpectedly, around the Iranian presidential campaign in May 2013, and which became associated with the subsequent victory of Hassan Rouhani. Here, I examine the construction of what I call the ‘compassionate state’ as that which partially substituted for and mitigated the national despair in the face of harsh economic sanctions and the emotional residues of 2009. This notion of the state as empathetic, as acknowledging people’s pain, created a stark contrast not only with the previous administration, that of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but also with the political system as a whole - or the ‘regime’, as it is often referred to on Farsi Facebook pages.

In my data analysis chapters, I seek to develop the concepts of the ‘compassionate state’, along with that of the ‘vulnerable public’, and transnational regimes of empathy through focusing on the production of modes of national imaginary, and within a theoretical framework informed by feminist theories of affect and studies of emotion. In *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant discusses the relation between the national imaginary and modes of desiring a better life in the midst of crisis through attaching to objects which are actually an obstacle to the flourishing of citizens’ lives, ‘those binding kinds of optimistic relation we call “cruel.”’(p.3) She analyses ‘a precarious public sphere, an intimate public of subjects who circulate scenarios of economic and intimate contingency and trade paradigms for how best to live on, considering.’ (Berlant, 2011,

p.3). Throughout the case study chapters, I reflect on these improvised narratives that people construct around ‘objects of desire’ containing ‘clusters of promises’ (Berlant, 2011). I draw, in particular, on the concept of ‘intimate publics’, which for Berlant (2008a, 2011), are collectivities centred on warm, personal-seeming attachments to forms of popular culture, soap operas, celebrities, but above all dreams and wish-feelings, concerning the ‘good life’.

I argue that such an intimate public forms around the figure of Javad Zarif, the chief Iranian sanctions negotiator, constructing him as an object of fantasy and wish-feelings concerning the future. What strikes one is the affective generation and circulation of Javad Zarif himself as the heroic character, first and foremost for empathising and showing compassion towards a national body which had been deprived of empathy when it most yearned for it. Within this framework, I conceptualise the *injured or vulnerable nation* as the main genre through which these fantasies of optimism function, a genre which both generates and is shaped by what I call the *vulnerable public* as I discern its presence in the social media comments. These widely presumed relations of intimacy with the new government seem to have allowed a space within which this vulnerability could be exposed and articulated in political terms and thus framed as a common public concern.

In analysing social media comments, I focus specifically on differential categorisations of grievability and non-grievability, in other words, how some bodies and lives are valued differently from others, and how the conditions for livable life are differentially produced and allocated (Butler, 2004, 2010). I mentioned earlier that previous Iranian governments were perceived to have denied empathy to their suffering citizens. As

discussed in Chapter Six, this is also how Western governments, those responsible for imposing sanctions, tend to be framed in social media reflections on the sanctions negotiations. Within this framework, it is crucial to understand the roles played by both local and transnational regimes of affect (Chouliaraki, 2006; Pedwell, 2014) in defining the kinds of feelings it is appropriate to have, and the kinds of bodies that are the proper objects of such feelings. But '[t]he shaping of collective affect is... quite a different process than the orchestration of political emotion' (Berlant and Greenwald, 2012, p.77) Thus while the vulnerable public may be regarded as taking shape within regimes of affect, this public reflexively generates forms of thinking and feeling about the political which involve new configurations of 'us' and 'them', where 'we' are the vulnerable bodies denied empathy, and 'they' are the elites, global or local, who withhold this empathy. It is in these specific frameworks and modes that vulnerability and suffering are organised and articulated.

Expressions of vulnerability, as with other affective articulations, raise the question of the relation between language and embodiment. I endeavour, in this thesis, to map the relations between body, affects, social discourses and social media comments, in other words, how embodiment and affect are mediated. I do not seek to analyse Facebook utterances as direct expressions of pain or suffering. Rather, I treat them as social, communicative events (Fairclough 1995; 2003) which are both discursive and affective in character, and which involve the performative and discursive staging of vulnerability through online speech acts (Butler 1997b, 2016; Austin, 1962). The Facebook comments, as speech acts, are further mediated by genre as social communicative practice (Lomborg, 2011, 2014; Fairclough, 1995, 2003), as well as by the specific affordances of social media (see below), in relation to the political, social, discursive

and affective factors already referred to. Genre is here understood as the sets of conventions which frame social practice and, in particular, the content and form of social communication.

In the scholarship on affect and emotion, those who adopt a Deleuzian paradigm distinguish between affect as an ultimately undefinable intensity that is autonomous from language, and emotion as discursively socialised and ‘tamed’ affect. In my analysis, however, I have drawn on the approaches of scholars, particularly Lauren Berlant (2008, 2011), Sara Ahmed (2004) and Margaret Wetherell (2012) who are not concerned with hard and fast distinctions between affect and emotion. Ahmed and Wetherell do not regard affect as autonomous from discourse, in contrast to Massumi (2002) and other Deleuzians. While my approach is open to the Deleuzian notion of affective intensities that may exceed the order of signification, I argue that Wetherell’s notion of affects as being generated in social interaction among social agents, in what she calls affective-discursive practice, may usefully build on the insights of both Deleuzian and non-Deleuzian strands, while avoiding some of their more problematic aspects, which may be characterised as the conceptual separation of affective and discursive levels, in the first case, and a tendency towards their complete identification, in the second. It is with this attention to social practice that I conceptualise online comments as language in use, that is, as utterances (Bakhtin 1986) and as performative speech acts (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1997b; Ahmed, 2004).

I do not conceptualise social media as a sphere of liberation (Gheytanchi, 2015) or as a privileged site for affective flows (Papacharissi, 2014). However, it offers an ‘infrastructure’ (Butler, 2016, p.14), a ‘space of appearance’ for the political, even when

more contestatory and spectacular offline forms of the political do not materialise. In this sense and in this context (Farsi cyberspace), Facebook seems to offer a space for communication concerning matters of common concern, which is one criterion for a public sphere (Habermas, 1991). However, Facebook is not here viewed mainly as a site for political mobilisation and/or a facilitator for social movements, but explored for its circulation and aggregation of what I see as ‘crisis narratives’ manifested in the surfacing of embodied and performative articulations of the pain and suffering of Iranians; these narratives, I propose, can help us understand the complexities of the production of political subjects.

In looking at how affect operates in online communities, I explore how it helps to cohere forms of belonging, including those that may constitute online publics. I consider how these forms of belonging may be analysed, forms which, significantly, for our purposes, include national belonging and the concept of the national imaginary. I relate this topic to the question of online communities and to what extent they form publics. I conceive of national imaginaries as constituted and reconstituted around a series of phantasmic attachments to particular objects, which may change over time. The ‘compassionate state’ is one such set of attachments, reshaping the national imaginary around the notion of injurability and injured bodies. I do not necessarily, however, mean to imply that there is a progressive dynamic to this reshaping. What Sima Shakhsari calls the ‘performance of transnational nationalism’ (2010, p.6) on social media is very much in evidence in the case of many of these Farsi Facebook comments.

Research Questions

My initial aim was to answer the following questions: What were the implications of sanctions for contemporary Iranian politics? How do we elaborate a framework for analysing the relation of politics and publics, outside of critical political moments, which avoids the binarism of oppression vs. resistance? My eventual overarching question became: how was the sanctions crisis affectively and discursively mediated, and what do these mediations reveal about the national imaginary? In order to answer these questions, I organised the analysis of the data into three chapters, each based on a group of related subordinate questions.

In my first case study chapter, I ask: what were the affective modes generated around the election of Rouhani in 2013 and what new forms of attachment to the political do they enable? How do they relate to the affective patterns that appear on the Facebook page of Javad Zarif, Rouhani's foreign minister and chief Iranian negotiator in the talks on sanctions? How do these modes frame sanctions in terms of national narrative, in particular in relation to the notion of sanctions as 'crisis'? In my analysis of the data, I was able to identify new modes of hopeful attachment both to the figure of Zarif and to what I conceptualise as the 'compassionate state' that he was deemed to represent, based around acknowledgement of a 'pain' that had previously been denied. This 'pain' was not necessarily entirely related to sanctions, but by defining sanctions as exceptional crisis of precarity, this 'pain' could be subsumed within an optimism concerning relief from sanctions.

The second case study chapter concerns the mediations of the vulnerability expressed in the Facebook comments. How does the online 'exposure' of vulnerability relate to the

close relationship seemingly constructed between the public and Rouhani and Zarif? If the online public is not a classic, deliberative public, what affective modes govern it? I found that expressions of intimacy and informality on Facebook were connected to a sense of being able to ‘expose’ a previously hidden vulnerability. Drawing in part on Berlant’s notion of intimate publics, I conceptualise a ‘vulnerable public’ which is constitutive of a national imaginary that is reshaped as injurable and precarious.

The last case study chapter deals with the modes of differentiation between self and other that emerge in the comments. How does the discourse of grievability help us to understand categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ that emerge in relation to forms of vulnerability that emerge on social media? In what ways are affective modes of ‘us and them’ structured in transnational terms, on both the Zarif and BBC Farsi pages? What are the transnational modes engaged in the online articulation of pain, suffering, anger and shame? How are these affective modes relatable to the biopolitics of governing populations? How do these identifications of ‘us’ and ‘them’ shape the national imaginary? In my interpretation of the data, I see vulnerability and a vulnerable public as being mobilised around sanctions in such a way that there may be a sense of contestation, but little apparent disturbance to the normative political framework, unlike the Iranian street protests of 2009 (or, indeed, those of 2017-18, which I briefly discuss in the Conclusion). The distance that Zarif and Rouhani establish from both conventional political factions through their empathetic discourse allowed this privileged political online space to exist. The orientation towards sanctions as resolvable problem both activated and absorbed (for a time) other political concerns and affective injuries.

Comprehensive sanctions: an overview

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has been under varying degrees of sanctions,² but the period of intensified sanctions on Iran effectively began in 2006, when, in response to allegations concerning attempts on the part of Iran to develop a nuclear weapons capacity, the United Nations Security Council imposed additional sanctions, which were binding upon all member states (Gordon, 2013, p.974; United Nations, 1945).³

To provide essential context, I here sketch out some of the implications for Iranians of the implementation of what are called ‘comprehensive sanctions’. I then briefly discuss the data selection and summarise my methodology, and provide a chapter outline.

The sanctions were not limited to measures taken by the U.N., but included unilateral sanctions imposed by the United States. The U.S. economic sanctions included the threat of punitive measures on other countries to prevent them from doing any business with Iran. This was criticised even by U.S. allies as extraterritorial interference with third countries in their commercial relations with Iran (Gordon, 2013). The United States continued expanding its punitive measures against Iran, which reached their climax in 2010. As Joy Gordon writes, the measures were planned primarily through

² For example, Iran was not able to renew its civil airliner fleet because the U.S banned Iran’s access to the relevant technologies citing possibilities of inappropriate use; they did so at the expense of several plane crashes over the last four decades of sanctions on airplane technologies.

³ Under Article 25 of the U.N. Charter, any measures imposed in accordance with Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter are binding upon all member states. Article 25 of Chapter V states: ‘The Members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the present Charter.’ Also, Article 39 indicates that the UN Security Council can ‘determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression and shall make recommendations, or decide what measures shall be taken in accordance with Articles 41 and 42, to maintain or restore international peace and security.’ Following this, Article 40 clarifies further the role of the U.N. Security Council: in order to ‘prevent an aggravation of the situation, the Security Council may, before making the recommendations or deciding upon the measures provided for in Article 39, call upon the parties concerned to comply with such provisional measures as it deems necessary or desirable. Such provisional measures shall be without prejudice to the rights, claims, or position of the parties concerned. The Security Council shall duly take account of failure to comply with such provisional measures.’ (United Nations, 1945)

two statutes, the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010 (CISADA) and the Iran Threat Reduction and Syria Human Rights Act of 2012 (ITRSHA), as well as through a series of executive orders, and by placing informal pressure on other nations and international institutions. These measures go well beyond those authorized by the Security Council resolutions, and have broad, indiscriminate effects on Iran's economy, family remittances, education of Iranians abroad, and the availability and cost of imported goods. They also affect Iran's energy sector, and consequently the cost and availability of transportation, as well as manufacturing in general. The United States has largely been alone in imposing measures on Iran and other nations that are extensive and indiscriminate. The use of broad trade sanctions with a blanket impact on the civilian population was criticized extensively in the 1990s, giving rise to the "smart sanctions" movement (Gordon, 2013, p.974).

This meant devastating effects for Iran, and marked 'a departure from the carefully targeted sanctions policies favoured by many governments in recent decades, especially that of the EU' (Moret, 2015, p.120). It is argued that in spite of the Western governments' intentions to limit the measures to 'targeted sanctions', which meant the possibility of trade in 'specific' and 'selective' areas, the widespread and omnipresent oil embargoes reached the level of 'de facto comprehensive sanctions, widely associated in the past with negative humanitarian consequences' (Moret, 2015, p.120). In her article entitled 'Humanitarian impacts of economic sanctions on Iran and Syria', Erica Moret (2015) gives a thorough overview of what 'comprehensive sanctions' mean in practice in terms of loss of life and unintended effects on ordinary lives. Characterised

as ‘collective punishment and suffering’ for civilians (Eriksson, 2010, cited in Moret, 2015, p.121) a ‘deadly weapon’ and ‘blunt instrument’ (Hufbauer et al., 2007, cited in Moret, 2015, p.121), comprehensive sanctions are described as being inflicted on the entirety of states and societies as a whole. Often escapable for the governing elites, comprehensive sanctions primarily affect ‘vulnerable sectors of society - namely children, women, the elderly, the infirm and the underprivileged’ (Moret, 2015, p.121). Moret argues that in spite of being ‘employed with the expressed rationale of avoiding the so-called more inhumane effects of war, the humanitarian consequences of comprehensive sanctions can sometimes be as damaging as military force, if not more so’, and ‘[a]s such, they are seen as less ethical and harder to justify on legal and moral grounds’ (Moret, 2015, p.121). Nevertheless, she argues, in spite of credible reports on the ‘detrimental impacts of broadened international sanctions on the health and well-being of ordinary citizens’:

policy-makers appear reluctant to acknowledge responsibility for the damage the measures may be causing, be it directly or indirectly. While the situation is still in its infancy, ignoring such reports in the longer term could lead the international community to contribute inadvertently to a worsening humanitarian situation in the region. (Moret, 2015, p.120)

These material realities, as I see them, provide an essential part of the context for understanding the affective-discursive articulations of pain and suffering on Iranian social media. It is the affective accumulations of hope, despair, grief and anger in the Facebook comments around the halting and protracted negotiations of 2013-15, and the

discursive narrativisations within which these affective modes are embedded, that are my principal topic of investigation.

Methodological considerations; case study selection

In analysing the Facebook comments, I have employed what I term ‘discursive affect analysis’, that is, a form of discursive analysis that reads for discursive-affective patterns. These patterns can be identified through the repetitive use of tropes, affective repertoires and normative sequences (Wodak et al., 1999; Wetherell, 2012). Features of Facebook as it is used include the refrain, the chorus, the sarcastic putdown, obscene abuse, but also, in my case studies, long epistles in a personal and respectful style, addressed to Zarif. Facebook’s particular technological affordances are not easily separable from the changing conventions of social media use (Lomborg, 2011, 2014). I have endeavoured to categorise comments in terms of generic conventions, understanding genre in its broader sense as social, communicative practice (Lomborg, 2011, 2014; Fairclough, 1995, 2003). I analyse genre as constructing and shaping the articulation of suffering in relation to social belonging and distinctions of ‘us’ and ‘them’. For the chapter on the emergence of the compassionate state, I treated compassion as a genre. In the second data chapter, on vulnerable publics, I focus on intimacy and vulnerability as a genre. In the third data chapter, on grievability in a transnational frame, I identify genres of grievability. Each of these genres can be divided into sub-genres in terms of style and content. I see Facebook comments as language in social use, and hence as dialogic utterances (Bakhtin, 1986; Polyzou, 2008), which means that the formation of meanings and narrative genres is always unfinished, and is thus both structured and structuring. I follow Sabsay (2016) in understanding

subjectivity itself as exposed already to the other, and thus as inherently both vulnerable (Butler, 2010, 2016) and dialogic: ‘We do not only act through the speech act: speech acts also act on us (Butler, 2016, p.16).

I focus on Farsi Facebook comments made during three key periods of the sanctions negotiations which began in October 2013 and concluded with the final agreement of July 2015. These were negotiations between the Iranian government side, led by the foreign minister Javad Zarif, and the ‘P5+1’, the five members of the United Nations Security Council, the United States, France, Britain, China and Russia, plus Germany. These powers were often referred to by global and also Farsi media sources, as well as by Iranian citizens, as the ‘global powers’, or the ‘Western powers’, even though China and Russia (both non-members of NATO) were among them. This reflected the perception and, arguably, the reality that the United States, backed up by the European Union countries, was leading the P5+1 in the negotiations.

I have focused on developing a qualitative, in-depth analysis of the affective discourse of comments on three Farsi Facebook pages that were much commented on during the negotiations. Shortly after being elected as the foreign minister of Iran in 2013, Zarif set up a Facebook account, which sparked both celebratory and condemnatory comments (Radio Farda, 2013). Facebook is officially banned in the country, so this could be seen as a controversial move, coming from someone within the government. This is one of the pages that I focus on. The other data sources are two related Facebook pages: that of official BBC Farsi, and of Mehdi Parpanchi, a journalist on BBC Farsi, who re-posts BBC Farsi news items. In selecting these pages and the comments they attracted, I endeavoured to trace the relations between the historical and ordinary lives,

between larger political and institutional frameworks, and the affective patterns mediated in the Facebook comments. In Chapter Three, I explain in more detail my reasons for selecting these pages.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter One, I examine how the relationship between affect and politics may be conceptualized within feminist scholarship. I begin with Sara Ahmed's argument (2004a) that affect and emotion are discursively mediated, in contrast to Brian Massumi's work (2002) which emphasises the pre-linguistic and indeed often emancipatory character of affect, as against the socialised and discursive character of emotion. Ahmed attends to the role of affect in the reinforcement of domination and exclusion, and to the calling up of affects in performative utterances or speech acts. I move onto the recent work on affect in relation to the imagined community of the nation, and online manifestations of belonging. I then discuss feminist explorations of affective regimes as manifestations of biopolitical governmentality – examining grievability in the work of Butler (2004, 2010), and pity and empathy in the work of Chouliaraki (2006) and Pedwell (2014) respectively. These scholars have adopted a Foucauldian approach to understanding how affect is deployed in the governing of populations, or how affect operationalises domination. These are denominated as regimes of affect – in other words, affective modes of governmentality (see Lemke, 2002, 2016).⁴ I trace here the advantages and possible disadvantages of such conceptual and analytical tools, in preparation for their subsequent application to the analysis of

⁴ As Thomas Lemke (2002, 2016) has argued, Foucault's later writings are concerned to trace the relation between domination at the level of the state and the micro-politics through which governmentality forms and disciplines subjects. Although different levels are involved, I follow Lemke in not seeing a binary distinction between domination and governmentality.

sanctions on Iran as biopolitical governance and the differing emotional norms promoted by the Ahmadinejad and Rouhani administrations, as well as by global media and political institutions. We will then be in a position to trace relations between everyday affective practices and these regimes, as manifested in social media. I finish this chapter by considering the the concept of ‘intimate publics’ (Berlant 2008a, 2011) whereby affective publics are formed in relations of assumed intimacy with the objects of their feelings, such as favoured politicians. These ‘affective contracts’, such as the one that I propose existed between Javad Zarif and his public, involve an expectation of reciprocity, so the relationship is by no means only one-way. But such optimistic attachments are potentially ‘cruel’, in Berlant’s terms, if the desired object turns out to be an obstacle to one’s ‘striving’.

In Chapter Two, I examine how online publics have been conceptualised in relation both to affect and to social media. I situate this project as distinct both from those studies which have concentrated upon the online presence of ‘bottom-up’ social movements in Iran and the Middle East, or from those that have focused in a Eurocentric fashion on social media as index of modernisation. Studies of social movements, I argue, tend to give affect either a subordinate role in relation to political deliberation, or conceive affect as essentially non-discursive and hence liberatory. My study, in contrast, attends to the imbrication of political crisis in everyday life, and the mobilisation of affect as discursively mediated. Avoiding too rigid an emphasis on either the decline of a deliberative public, or, for that matter, on the capacity for the creation of counter-publics, we introduce, in an Iranian context, the notion of vulnerable publics, oriented around the affective experience of injurability in the face of the layered crisis of sanctions and the earlier repression of the Green Movement of 2009.

Lauren Berlant's work on intimate publics (2008a, 2011), is interpreted as helping to conceptualise online publics in relation both to the affective and the political, and to see these publics as oriented, in their online comments, around narrative genres of vulnerability and injurability, which permits the development of the concept of the 'vulnerable public'.

In Chapter Three, I elaborate the methodology of this project. I discuss the issues involved in the selection of websites and also the harvesting of the Facebook data for analysis, as linked to key periods in the negotiations, and explaining the issues involved in a qualitative approach to social media data. I outline the reasons for my choice of discourse analysis as key method for interpreting the Facebook comments, and how one may read for affective patterns and modes. In this connection, genre becomes a key focus of the analysis, in other words the importance of identifying the conventions governing communication as social practice, including social media genres, as a basis for my subsequent investigation of 'the compassionate state' and of vulnerability, both as genres in themselves, and as generative of sub-genres.

In Chapter Four, the first of three data analysis chapters, I propose to explore what I call the 'compassionate state' associated with the Rouhani government elected in 2013, through analysing comments on the Facebook page of Javad Zarif, the chief minister during the negotiations. I argue that the new government develops a new discourse of compassion through 'recognition' of people's suffering under sanctions, and as a counter to the perceived lack of recognition under both transnational and previous local affective discourses. It is this focus on sanctions as meta-cause that allows one to speak of the sanctions crisis as produced in affective-discursive practices, including online

utterances. Instead of an open-ended situation without genre, crisis now ‘find[s]... its genre’ as event (Berlant, 2011, p.20). Through this ‘eventilisation’ (Foucault, 1969, 1984, cited in Berlant, 2011, p.64), the national imaginary is reconstituted and redefined around a suffering which is caused from without, rather than from within, as with the repression of 2009.

In Chapter Five, I turn to the question of publics and their modes of constitution.

Analysing citizens’ direct appeals to Zarif on his Facebook page, I argue that a new ‘intimate public’ is discernible (Berlant, 2008a, 2011). However, in order to highlight the specific affective modes of political articulation within these comments, and, in a somewhat different way, the comments on the BBC Farsi pages. I elaborate on vulnerability as a set of attachments and orientations that constitute *vulnerable publics*, which in turn help to constitute the national imaginary. In this framework, it is possible to trace the emergence of genres of self-grieving, of collective self-mourning, in other words, new forms of affective-discursive political articulation, which include the generation of anger, and how they are continuously shaped and reshaped during the sanctions negotiations.

In Chapter Six, I trace the transnational mobilisation of affect and its role in the constitution of sanctions as crisis. I argue that the affective regime of (counter) empathy (Pedwell, 2014) operating during Obama’s administration functioned to exclude Iran and Iranian bodies from the frame of those whose suffering could be regarded as grievable (Butler 2010, 2016), while holding out the prospect of inclusion among those bodies deemed legitimate, although labels denoting trustworthiness have failed to ‘stick’ (Ahmed 2004a) to Iranian bodies. These affective regimes, I further

argue, depend on the power to place certain bodies as exceptional, outside the community sharing universal values, even as the universal is invoked in public pronouncements. In contesting these regimes of grievability, Iranian online commentators develop their own counter-discourses, frequently based on anger and hostility as well as shame, which mobilise new and old forms of national distinctiveness.

I conclude by summarising how fluid, transient, online publics are constituted precisely through the affective regimes of counter-compassion which play upon the national body, whereby Iranians are constructed as subjects as yet undeserving of empathy. I analyse how commentators not only direct their articulations of pain towards the Iranian government, but to Western governments and media, on the basis of their assumed insensibility to national suffering. These pages become zones of affective contestation, not only through the mixing of genres and tones, of news platform and social media, but through the asymmetries of power that the news platforms materialise.

The discourses around sanctions on Iran can suggest the ways in which violence can be justified and legitimised within frameworks that are already prepared, involving classification of lives to be preserved and lives to be put at risk; the categories of grievability and non-grievability are produced by this violence that is already within the discursive framework. Thus the reason that sanctions are not discussed outside of narrow political and economic paradigms is that regimes of affect already operate to legitimate particular discursive modalities. A Butlerian approach points to how difficult it is to escape these already interpreted categories, given that ‘the compassionate state’ itself has arisen from within these affective regimes. Berlant,

meanwhile, provides inspiration for understanding how the vulnerable public attaches to the neoliberal hope of compassionate state, in this context, as a central consolatory component of the national imaginary. Drawing on the feminist scholarship on affect has allowed the interpretation of this Iranian case study within a much less restricted set of boundaries, which points to the limitations of discussing Iranian nationalism in terms of the Persian Empire, the great Cyrus, or other ancient reference points. Iranian ideas of the nation - to an extent like anywhere else, but also in specific ways - are extremely imbricated within transnational regimes of power.

Chapter One:

Mediating Emotion: Theorising Affect and Discourse

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the conceptual tools I will be utilising throughout the thesis. My analysis engages with feminist theoretical approaches to affect and emotion as means for thinking about politics in a time of crisis. The aim of this chapter is to set out a theoretical basis for researching affect and the bodily in online texts. In particular, I look at Facebook comments in relation to the political and the discursive. In proposing a framework for analysing affect, the chapter evaluates the strengths and shortcomings of existing approaches. In particular, it focuses on the extent to which affect can be theorised and thus analysed at the discursive level; but also questions whether the political is ever fully discursive – and if its operation sometimes relies on affective intensities which are not directly referenced in language.

There has been a good deal of serious focus on emotions in politics in recent years within the disciplines of politics and international relations (for example, Demertzis, ed., 2013; Richards, 2007; Heaney and Flam, ed., 2014; Hoggett and Thompson, ed. 2012; Hutchison, 2014, 2016). By ‘serious focus’, I mean that emotions are less likely to be seen as aberrations in politics, or as symptoms of a political disease invading what should ideally be a rational, public sphere dominated by educated males. I have, however, found feminist theorisations of affect to be most useful for this research. Although the ‘affective turn’ has been a phenomenon across the humanities, social sciences and sciences in the last two decades, it was feminist scholarship that from the

beginning focused on the construction of the gendered and embodied subject and its relationship to power. In particular, feminists had engaged from the 1970s and 1980s onwards with psychoanalytic, racialised and heteronormative constructions of self, body and emotion. From the late 1990s, however, ‘the affective turn’ among feminist scholars gathered pace as a manifestation of dissatisfaction with ‘the linguistic turn’, that is approaches identified with poststructuralist feminism, which were often held to focus too strongly or exclusively upon language and discourse, to the detriment of embodied states. As Anu Koivunen points out, however, ‘a turn to affect can be detected both *against* and *within* the poststructuralist, social constructionist theories of subject and power’. Thus ‘[a]ffects have become an object of interest both as articulations of culture, language and ideology and as a force field that questions scholarly investments in those terms’ (Koivunen, 2010, p.9).

Politicising Affect and Emotion

How do we theorise affect in relation to the political? This question inevitably involves consideration of the relation between affect and discourse. Some would question the assumption that the political can only be analysed discursively, or that affect can only be analysed in relation to politics via the discursive, (Massumi, 2002; Kølvråa, 2015). At the same time, the comment streams we will analyse consist, by and large, of textual material. How problematic is it, then, to read the bodily and the affective into linguistic signs, into traces of discursively articulated interactions? For example, do we treat the affective connotations of the language used and the subject matter discussed in online comments - frequently including overt references to the bodily and to feelings - as simply expressions of pre-existing emotional states, or are emotions ‘produced’ in and

through the social act of communication? Should we then see these comments, not as expressive of existing states, but as (consciously or not) performed speech acts which contain social messages about emotions, or are ‘incitements to discourse’ (Foucault, 1998) about emotion? If there is an exclusive focus on what can be socialised, or captured in words, does this lead to a neglect of affective ‘intensities’ (Massumi, 2002), to the affective and bodily ‘excess’ which subverts or circumvents discourse? If the conceptual and analytical level remains highly abstract, where does this leave analysis of affective communication at the level of social practice, between real social actors in concrete situations? In what ways is their communication mediated?

In answering these sorts of questions, which are crucial for our research, we note that broadly speaking, there exist two main types of scholarly approach. The first group of scholars have focused on the analysis of language in studying how affect and emotion are socially materialised and put to work politically – particularly on language as signs and their (affective) values. The second group, who take the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Massumi (2002) as their starting points, argue that affect is autonomous of language, and that as such it can never be captured linguistically, but only registered in the gaps or incoherences of discourse, that which is not explicitly stated (Kølvraa, 2015). Emotion, although bound up with linguistic utterance, is in this view only the mediated socialisation of the force of affect. Other scholars have different starting points, often choosing to focus on what analytical tools may work in specific social contexts. Wetherell (2012), while interested in both of the former approaches, argues that theories of affect must be grounded in real social practice, where affect and discourse are necessarily intertwined and co-constitutive. We find her notion of *affective-discursive practice* to be highly useful, and the implications of the

concept are elucidated in the chapter below specifically in relation to the textual analysis of Iranian Facebook comments as social, communicative practice.

Lastly, before I move to evaluate different approaches in greater depth, it is important to signpost an area of debate often avoided, as sparking tiresome humanist versus anti- or posthumanist controversy. Both main groups of scholars referred to above largely see affect and emotion as not *residing in* particular bodies, but as somehow existing *between* them, either as flowing as autonomous force, for the Deleuzians, or attaching to bodies as linguistic sign-value (Ahmed, 2004a, for example). In this sense, both groups reference post-structuralism, albeit in different ways. This standpoint is helpful, up to a point, in analyzing Facebook comment strands where individual commentators seem to arise and disappear, merely reinforcing or disrupting the affective flow. However, while affect and emotion are undoubtedly social, social interactions, as Wetherell (2012) and Birkett (2014) argue, involve particular body-minds which absorb, refract and reflect upon affective-discursive practices and material social realities in ways that are shaped by their specific histories (see also Reddy, 2001). Although this study does not engage with particular individuals via interviews, for example, it would be implausible, and indecent, to analyse suffering and vulnerability as social articulations unless one also envisaged this suffering as having a grounding in the material deprivation (for example, the drug shortages) imposed upon millions of people through sanctions.

Affect, sign-values and bodies: the approach of Sara Ahmed

I consider the work of Sara Ahmed to be crucial for understanding the ways in which emotions are politically mobilised and bodies are made present in discourses and perceptions. Key to her approach is the notion of bodies as being given attributes via language – attributes which are political. She explains that she ‘focused on language *because* I was interested in bodies’. (Ahmed, 2014, p.226) She argues, however, to see emotions as social and political, we must abandon models which locate emotions in individual subjects. Ahmed argues that ‘feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation’ (Ahmed, 2004a, p.8) Hence she critiques the prevalent mode in psychology which interiorises emotions, seeing them as ‘centered internally in subjective feelings’ (ibid.).⁵ Ahmed cautions, however, against seeing emotions simply as exteriorised, in that this tends to create another body where feelings are centred, this being the social body, as in the case of Emile Durkheim’s crowd (Ahmed, 2004a. p.9). In refusing this ‘either/or’, her move is not towards ‘both/and’ (emotions as both individual and social), in that this fails to question how the individual and the social are distinguished and bounded in the first place. Rather, she argues that emotions create the very experience of distinct bodies possessing surfaces onto which we can project attributes: ‘it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made’ (Ahmed, 2004a, p.10).

This is a foundational insight for this project, which focuses on one such object in online circulation - the body of the nation - an object which is also central to Ahmed’s explanation of how emotions are political. Analysing a British news report, she notes

⁵ Here, she leaves out discursive or social psychology, for which, see Wetherell (2012), discussed below.

that “[t]o say, ‘the nation mourns’ is to generate the nation, as if it were a mourning subject. The ‘nation’ becomes a shared ‘object of feeling’ through the ‘orientation’ that is taken towards it.” (Ahmed, 2004a, p.13). Emotion, in this case, is the effect of a performative speech act, ‘the nation mourns’, which materialises and directs our feelings through simultaneously bringing into being the object we are supposed to have feelings about, and orienting us towards it. Ahmed’s perspective, then, is not one in which emotions circulate ‘by themselves’: rather, repeated speech acts by both politicians and ordinary people constantly produce emotions and their objects, in linked social performances which in turn become a historical inheritance.⁶

Impelled by this accumulation of speech acts, feelings move and circulate within an ‘affective economy’ - or rather, it is signs of affect, objects of feeling that circulate.⁷ ‘Emotions work as a form of capital: affect [value] does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its [the sign’s] circulation’ (Ahmed, 2004b, p.120). As Ahmed points out, however, it is only ‘some signs’ (such as ‘the nation’) that increase in value at a given time, and history plays a key role in shaping this process of value attribution. ‘Feelings appear in objects, or indeed as objects with a life of their own, only by the concealment of how they are shaped by histories’ (Ahmed, 2004a, pp.120-1), which include, here, histories of nationalism and colonialism. In her examples, histories shape which affects (hate, fear) stick to non-white bodies and which affects (love) attach (‘stick’) to white ones. But affects ‘slide’ between signs, as well as sticking to them. Thus a particular ‘foreign body’ becomes metonymically associated

⁶ I return several times in discussions of theory and method to the concept of speech acts, most often associated with Austin (1962), though the notion of speech acts as constituting their objects is not part of his framework.

⁷ Ahmed herself describes this as a ‘limited analogy’ (2004b).

with the larger collective body of the Other which places the body of the nation under threat, and thus, in another metonymic shift, the particular, white body of the subject. Affective value is thus produced negatively by the difference or displacement between signs. Yet socially powerful and meaningful feelings are created by the interlinked processes of the movement of emotions between signs, and the attachment of emotions to these signs. This process, in turn, ‘depends on past histories of association’ (Ahmed, 2004a, p.127).

Margaret Wetherell worries that Ahmed’s concept of the ‘affective economy’ involves ‘endless and mysterious circulations’ of affect (Wetherell, 2012, p.159), whereas she aims to locate affect in ‘actual bodies and social actors’. ‘What creates [affective] value and/or capital’, Wetherell argues, ‘is the direction and history of affective practice over time’ (ibid.). With this modification, she aims to bring about some convergence between her approach and Ahmed’s. Her key concept is ‘affective-discursive practice’, a term which has two main implications: firstly, that affect not only comes ‘wrapped’ in socially created meaning, but that affect and discourse shape each other in complex feedback loops; secondly, that affect and discourse, as mutually imbricated, develop and change through social practice involving social agents.

Affect as autonomous force: Deleuzian approaches

For both Ahmed and Wetherell, affect is inextricably bound up with meaning-making and discourse, and hence with designated emotions. Sara Ahmed has observed that she is ‘not interested in distinguishing affect and emotion as if they refer to different aspects of experience’ (2014, p.208). For Deleuze and Guattari, however, in the interpretation of their translator Brian Massumi, affect is very broadly defined as ‘an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another’ (Massumi, 1987, p.xvi). This moves the focus away from nameable emotions or feelings, which in this framework are only the socialised, partial manifestations of affect. One example given by Deleuze and Guattari concerns Freud’s study of Little Hans. Freud’s interpretation of this case study within the Oedipal framework of castration anxiety, shame and guilt is characterized by them in terms of a blocking of routes for affect and for desire: ‘Professor Freud's intervention assures a power takeover by the signifier, a subjectification of affects’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.14). Affect, here, is apparently trammelled by language (the signifier), on being transformed into the named personal feelings of a particular subject, Little Hans. On other occasions, however, affect eludes linguistic traps, instead subverting language and subjectification. Discussing a B-movie, Deleuze and Guattari refer to the ‘circulation of impersonal affects, an alternate current that disrupts signifying projects as well as subjective feelings’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.233).

In Brian Massumi's view, following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), affect is conceptualised as a kind of autonomous force or intensity which is never entirely capturable by language, discourse or social convention:

Affect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage, are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the intensest (most contracted) expression of that capture - and of the fact that something has always and again escaped (Massumi 1996, quoted in Hemmings, 2005, p.562).⁸

For Massumi, there is a distinction between affect as intensity or potential and emotion as the social form/content given to that intensity in discourse. He characterises affect as 'irreducibly bodily and autonomic', an 'intensity' that is disconnected from 'meaningful sequencing, from narration', whereas emotion is described as 'subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of a quality of experience which is from that point onward defined as personal' (Massumi, 2002, p.28). In this framework, affect is encoded or congealed into identifiable emotions or feelings such as hate, love, boredom, anger, fear, shame, happiness, melancholy and combinations thereof, the generation or communication of which is indeed dependent on social and historical context. Emotion

⁸ In *A Thousand Plateaus*, the term 'emotion' is used sparingly, but may encompass both affect and feeling, whereas for Massumi (1996) 'emotion', like 'feeling', denotes the product of the simultaneous capture and escape of affect. Thus Deleuze and Guattari: 'Catatonia is: "This affect is too strong for me," and a flash is: "The power of this affect sweeps me away," so that the Self (Moi) is now nothing more than a character whose actions and emotions are desubjectified, perhaps even to the point of death (1987, p.356). Or: 'Affect is the active discharge of emotion, the counterattack, whereas feeling is an always displaced, retarded, resisting emotion' (ibid., p.400). So affect, in these examples, is desubjectified emotion, and feeling is emotion located in a subject.

is only ‘the expression of affect in gesture and language, its conventional or coded expression’ (Massumi 2002, p.32).⁹ In Chapter Two below, indeed, I refer to Zoe Papacharissi’s use of Deleuze and Massumi in order to interpret the accumulations of tweets during the social mobilisations of 2011 in Egypt as creating an affective intensity which worked to undermine the dominant order of discourse (Papacharissi, 2014). While the tweets clearly used linguistic-discursive signs, in this view, they did not function as discursive in any deliberative and logically coherent way – they are taken to be moved by and in turn to mobilise affect in its pre-linguistic sense.

The question remains, however, whether there is ever a ‘pure’ affect existing prior to language, history, subjectification and the social.¹⁰ And if there is, as several scholars ask, how would we know, given that Massumi readily allows that affect becomes (is reduced to) something else - emotion - when it is socio-linguistically codified? (Hemmings, 2005; Wetherell, 2012). Clare Hemmings suggests that ‘affect might in fact be valuable precisely to the extent that it is not autonomous’ from sociality and textuality (2005, p.565). A key aspect of Hemmings’ critique of the work of Massumi and Eve Sedgwick is that these writers focus on the positive, emancipatory aspects of affect, rather than its socially dominant forms, in order to posit a future realm of freedom beyond social discourse and the strictures of discursively-fixated critics (see also Koivunen 2010, p.16). Papacharissi thus, in this view, aligns herself with this utopianism, insofar as her application of Deleuzian conceptions to social media is

⁹ Shouse (2005) further distinguishes between feelings as internalised categories and emotions as their social display: ‘[w]e might understand feeling as a sensation that has been identified, categorized, and labeled, based on internalized schemata of experiences and predispositions, and further define emotion as the display of feeling (Shouse, 2005, quoted in Papacharissi, 2014, p.21).

¹⁰ For example, in *A Thousand Plateaus* ‘pure affects imply an enterprise of desubjectification’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.270).

concerned.

In taking the view that affect is not autonomous from language, and that affect and emotion are not essentially different, Sara Ahmed highlights that it has been important for her ‘not to assume or create separate spheres between consciousness and intentionality, on the one hand, and physiological or bodily reactions on the other.’ (2014, p.208) She also warns that ‘the designating of affect as what moves us beyond emotion, allows the reduction of emotion to personal or subjective feeling’ whereas both affect and emotion, in her view, are highly social, and neither can be seen as originating in individuals (2014, p.208). Ahmed thus rejects binary distinctions between the study of bodily affects and the study of discourse. For Ahmed, this approach helps keep the focus on affect and emotion as not only social, but political, and indeed – *contra* the view of affect as essentially emancipatory – as crucial to the work of domination, oppression and exclusion. It is this view of affect and emotion in their imbrications with power, in forms of national and transnational discursive contestation, which is crucial for the approach I adopt in this thesis.

Reading for Affective ‘Excess’

Deleuzian approaches to affect, however, raise interesting questions concerning how one reads for affective ‘excess’, which is admitted to exist by both the scholarly tendencies discussed above. Kølvråa attempts to tackle methodological difficulties arising from a Deleuzian perspective when he asks, ‘if affect is at odds with signifying practices and cannot be fully captured discursively, then where and how can one “read for affect” – if at all?’ (Kølvråa, 2015, p.183). This is also the key question posed by

Wetherell (2012), as noted above. Kølvråa points out, however, that as ‘even if affect and signification are to be thought of as different ‘planes’ of social reality, the analytical interest can and should be directed at how these are co-articulated’ (Kølvråa, 2015, p.184).

The challenge is, as such, to link a focus on affect to the analysis of textual statements, without reducing affect to a straightforward effect of (linguistic) signification. It comes to require, therefore, the discussion of how one might approach such statements in a way that seeks to capture or appreciate the affective intensity that is not simply stated in their literal content, which is in excess of their manifest meaning. But if affect remains different from its own signification, then this furthermore means that the interest in its transmission[...] must be informed by methods that can appreciate that the contagious transmission of affect does not necessarily entail a uniformity of its signification (Kølvråa, 2015, p.184).

The notion of affective contagion is itself problematic, as will be discussed below, while the idea that signification is only ever ‘literal’, or purely denotative, creates further problems (see also below). But Kølvråa is right to problematise the ways in which a generated affective ‘intensity’ may be associated with very different sorts of signification:

In thinking the planes of signification and affect separately, one is able to appreciate that affective contagion can adhere between political subjects who are antagonistic toward each other – and who therefore signify themselves and their affect in radically different ways (Kølvråa 2015, p.185).

The example he explores concerns Danish far right slanders concerning Muslims. The literal content of these slanders, he suggests, has nothing to do with their impact and social content. It is their unfettered quality, the patently obvious untruth of the slanders, and their distance from literal truth, which affectively projects violent hatred towards and upon the Muslim Other. Hence, one cannot analyse statements simply in terms of their overt signification. Their ‘style’ or form should also be analysed. He sums up his point thus:

statements are to be taken as signifying affective intensities rather than conceptual meaning. They are, so to speak, indicative of the affective investments and orientation of the subjects, and not claims made about the world to which they actually refer (Kølvraa, 2015, p.194).

Nonetheless, while I agree that scholars should remain open to reading for affective excess beyond that which is overtly signified, it is surely rare for discourse analysts to dismiss such readings. It has long been an axiom of literary criticism that style is inseparable from content in any assessment of the impact of a text on its readers. One could cite Roland Barthes’ analyses/evocations of highly affective connotations and their associated myths in the 1950s, which proceed from the denotational-literal level of signification to the social metanarratives that are at once hidden and obvious (Barthes, 1972).

Judith Butler’s work on performative speech acts is also mentioned by Kølvraa, but gets short shrift, as when he remarks that ‘[o]ne cannot reduce the transmission or contagion

of affect to something akin to ideological interpellation or citational performances (Althusser, 1971; Butler, 1997)' (Kølvraa, 2015, p.184). Yet Butler's discussion of hate speech in *Excitable Speech* (1997b) considers precisely the intensity of the affect that may be generated by social performance:

Why do the names that the subject is called appear to instill the fear of death and the question of whether or not one will survive? Why should a merely linguistic address produce such a response of fear? Is it not, in part, because the contemporary address recalls and reenacts the formative ones that gave and give existence? (Butler, 1997b)

In other words, the subject is affected because s/he is a social, discursively produced being and not only an injurable body. Hate speech calls into question the very grounds of that social existence and hence of subjecthood itself. Granted, the feeling of fear/disorientation generated in the object of hate speech is a predictable emotion, in Deleuzian terms, produced by a conventional *illocutionary* speech act, one with an intended consequence in particular situations (see Austin, 1962). Kølvraa is more concerned, one may say, with the unpredictable affects generated by hate speech. But Butler attempts to address such unpredictability, by exploring the *perlocutionary* (indirect) consequences of speech acts that do not necessarily relate to their original performance or social context. Thus the originally hateful insult word 'queer', if uttered at an LGBT rights demonstration, would undergo a resignification in which, perhaps, new, unconventional and/or challenging affects or emotions (pride, solidarity, acceptance, defiance) are generated.

Where does this leave us with performativity and performative speech acts, then? Why should there be a problem acknowledging that selves and social worlds are performatively cited and made through discourse, if one also concedes that discourse, as part of social practice, interacts with affective and unconscious dimensions, that language always struggles somewhat to capture feeling and social interaction, but that tensions or divergences between these processes can be registered by the investigator? So while this research places great emphasis on the imbrications of the affective and the discursive, it does not assume that one is completely subsumed within the other.

This being said, then, aspects of Kølvråa's argument deserve to be followed up. In reading for affect, he argues, one is primarily reading for intensities, not for designated emotions, in the manner, perhaps, of Sara Ahmed's readings of hate and shame (2004) or Carolyn Pedwell's readings of empathy (2015). In Kølvråa's example of the far right Australian politician Pauline Hanson, her projection of facial and bodily 'distress' concerning the 'threat' posed by the non-white Other served to create an affective bond with her followers, while progressives tended to feel 'horror' at these tactics. Yet in the experience of both groups, her mediated performances, which included speech acts, evoked an affective intensity which can, he argues, be summarised as 'fascination' or 'contagion'.

As such, affective contagion can be understood more strictly as a process through which a political space is 'charged', in other words, a process that raises the intensity of various positions in that space, even if they may become signified and oriented in different or oppositional ways (Kølvråa, 2015, p.197).

The real point, Kølvråa argues, of the Danish politician's hyperbolic statements about Muslims was precisely to raise the affective intensity of the debate around immigration, so that more extreme positions could no longer be ignored. It is arguable, for example, that there is evidence in the Facebook comments of an affective intensity around the figure of Javad Zarif, during and after the sanctions negotiations, which was by no means reducible to a definite set of significations, but instead generated a wide variety of emotions. Moreover, though affective-discursive production on Facebook was mainly textual-linguistic, commentators would have been responding to visual (including facial, bodily, vestimentary) and aural cues, in other words, images and recordings of Zarif in a variety of media. As Wetherell (2012) points out, there is a problem with quasi-magical notions of affects as 'contagious', 'travelling' or being 'transmitted' between bodies, but she is nonetheless interested in the mechanisms by which affective intensities are generated. I thus also focus at times, in the data analysis chapters, on 'choral' modes of affective comments, which seem to be relatable to notions of intensity and excess.

The ‘emotion complex’ perspective on language and bodily experience

If, in a Deleuzian framework, bodily affects and language are conceptualised as existing at separate levels, while non-Deleuzians stress that affect is always discursive, it is often forgotten that language itself is bodily. Ian Birkett (2014) cites, *inter alia*, Merleau-Ponty, William James, John Dewey and Vygotsky to make this point. He speaks of humans feeling the meaning of words through ‘the bodily sounding-board’. But feeling is not simply ‘there’, waiting to be expressed in speech or writing. Emotion, affective valence, is given shape in and through the utterance itself. Birkett also, however, points to the ways in which we struggle to find words for feelings and thoughts. ‘While discourse and emotion are intimately connected’, he observes, ‘they are not the same’. Emotion, he argues, are produced in a ‘complex’ in which there is a dynamic relationship between feeling, thoughts and speech in a body-mind matrix. So while it is true that the ‘feeling we have for words is something that outstrips their actual meaning, ...[nonetheless] we would not have this feeling without the words themselves.’ At the same time, while ‘thought material is restructured with the use of speech, that does not mean thought material can be readily articulated’ (Birkett, 2014, pp.12-13).¹¹

In a similar vein, William Reddy, in *The Navigation of Feeling* (2001) argues that the thought material we process contains a wealth of activated content that is never fully accessible to conscious attention. In that sense, discursive statements can only ever be

¹¹ This is not too far from Ann Cvetkovich’s (2012) flexible approach to the status of feelings as relating in varying ways to the linguistic-cognitive level, depending on the context. For her, the term ‘feeling(s)’ can do ‘some of the same work’ as the term ‘affect’, ‘acknowledging [their] somatic or sensory nature... as experiences that aren’t just cognitive concepts or constructions’ and ‘retaining the ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experience’ (Cvetkovich, 2012, p.4). She emphasises the need to keep to the fore the non-academic sense of feelings as productions of an integrated mind-body experience, rather than, for example, seeing discourse as the level that encompasses everything else.

incomplete, an approximate translation of material that is encoded in different ways at different levels. Our statements about feelings always include an exploratory and provisional element, as they seek to map a territory that is always changing. Reddy thus argues for a category of statement, the first person 'emotive', which attempts to describe what is felt as well as performing the emotion – for example, 'I'm angry'. This is, as a speech act, both performative and constative. Emotives thus emerge as a result of 'the indeterminacy of translation' between different registers of thought (Reddy, 2001, p.330).

Deborah Gould (2009), however, aligns the emotive with Massumi's idea of emotion as the cognitive-linguistic level, while affect is the intensity that is never fully named and captured (Gould, 2009, pp.37-8). Indeed, she points out, the emotive alters the affect to which it attempts to refer. As Gould further notes, Reddy admits that second-person claims about emotions, for example, 'you are angry' may act like emotives upon the listener (or for our purposes, the reader), and Gould further proposes that 'first-person plural emotion claims, for example, "We are angry", are also emotives, potentially affecting the feelings of the speaker and of those hearing the claim' (Gould, 2009, p.38fn). It seems difficult, indeed, to enforce rigid distinctions between emotives and other statements: in everyday social practice, Wetherell argues, emotives are not readily separable from other 'speech acts formulating reasons and thoughts ('cognitives'), or action plans and goals ('motives')', and there will be affective content in all three (Wetherell, 2012, p.73). Nonetheless, it is, I argue, valuable to attend to the ways in which emotions are signified in social interactions, particularly, for our purposes, those of a textual nature, without losing sight of what Birkett (2014) would call the bodily

element of the 'emotion complex'. In the next section, I discuss how certain affective sign values and their iteration can be analysed as characteristic of specific social groups.

In summing up this part of the discussion, I wish to make the point that while it may be unsatisfactory to regard affect as autonomous from and prior to discourse, as Deleuze/Massumi do, it is equally unsatisfactory to 'lock' affect so tightly into discourse that little attention is paid to the unpredictable and 'atmospheric' aspects of affect and to the ways in which discursive significations may be intensified, disrupted or subverted. On the other hand, it seems clear that online texts seemingly charged with affect are necessarily, at least in part, performative and that acknowledging this does not necessarily diminish the validity of the emotion which is the text's referent, whether the emotion existed at some level of the disaggregated self (Reddy, 2001), is brought into being in the performance (Butler, 1997b) or is the discursive socialisation of an inchoate intensity (Massumi, 2002). In some sense, the emotion/feeling/affect is realised, but also transformed, in the process of being made social, which includes being translated into linguistic signs (Birkett, 2014). These signs, in turn, will be given various affectively charged meanings, depending on the socially and historically shaped interpretive frameworks that the recipients inherit and in turn shape, in reflective or unreflective everyday practice.

It may seem counter-productive to insist too much on affect or language as located (at some point) in particular body-minds. As Adi Kuntsman argues: 'Ahmed's idea of affect as non-resident in particular bodies or minds is useful for analysts of affect in social media texts.' She reminds us that in Ahmed's approach, texts possess 'emotionality', and in a similar vein 'online posts generate replies and interactions

containing often strongly affective content' (Kuntsman, 2012, p.6). This research assumes, however, that sanctions have had material effects on particular bodies, even if we are more interested in sanctions as constituting and generating affective-discursive genres.

Speech Acts, Affective Belonging and Imagining the Nation

We previously argued, drawing on the work of Ahmed (2004a/2014) and Wetherell (2012) that affective-discursive practices could involve speech acts as key to the circulation of affective sign-values. In this section, we discuss scholarly approaches to speech acts as affective citations of identity and belonging, citations which may establish patterns of inclusion and exclusion, firstly, in relation to ephemeral online collectivities and, in turn, to larger and seemingly more coherent entities such as the 'public' or 'publics', and the 'nation'. This will help frame our analysis of the modes of Iranian national self-imagining and belonging, and of the forms of public that manifest themselves, in the Facebook comments we discuss in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

Insofar as this project is concerned with affective shifts in the national imaginary, it is inspired by Benedict Anderson's insight (1991) that national communities have to be repeatedly imagined and reimagined in strongly affective terms. 'In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined.'(1991, p.6) As he points out, 'we need to consider carefully how they [nations] have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy.' (1991, p.4) Thus Anderson's insights concerning 'the affective bonds of

nationalism' (1991, p.64) converge with those of scholars who have explored how online and offline communities perform identifications around changing national 'objects of attachment' (see Ahmed 2004a, and Berlant, 1991, 1997, 2008, 2011) and longing or belonging (see, for example, Shakhsari, 2010; Heaney and Stam, 2014; Hutchison, 2014, 2016).

The national imaginary, as a term, has been associated with both Lacanian and non-Lacanian usages. In Fairclough's sense, a social imaginary is associated with wish-feelings, with what 'might or could or should be' (Fairclough, 2003, p.207), as opposed to representations of what is or has been. But even Anderson's sense (1991) of the imagined nation envisages this constructed entity as extending back into the (imagined) past and constructing the present, as well as boding forth the future. A Lacanian approach, for scholars writing on regional or national identities (Hall, 1991; Vieira, 2017), involves the idea that nations as collective subjects, like individual subjects, experience an ontological anxiety concerning their own being, which is founded upon 'lack', upon misrecognition of the mirror-image as reality, where no reality exists. The national imaginary, then, partakes of the Lacanian Imaginary, in that it is a fiction, a sustaining fantasy of full existence, which must be continuously narrated via a chain of signifiers. If the chain of narration is broken, for example by trauma, the subject goes into crisis. Whilst being cautious about applying a fully Lacanian approach to the nation as subject, I am interested in the notion of Farsi Facebook comments (along with other communicative genres) as constituting signifying chains, whereby identity is continually repeated and performed. Furthermore, the narration of sanctions as national crisis may be seen as a way of resolving the crisis, of piecing back together the

fragments of what is imagined to be an originary unity, and thus recreating the national imaginary on a new basis.

I thus argue that online comments, as performative speech acts, may constitute the imagined national community on an everyday level. For an example, I turn back to *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004a/2014). In her 2014 postscript, Sara Ahmed returns to the example of the nation in mourning:

the speech act which says the nation feels this or that way does something, ...[it] becomes an injunction to feel that way in order to participate in a thing being named, such that to participate in the feeling or with feeling becomes a confirmation of feeling[...]. (Ahmed, 2014, p.227)

Speech acts, as performances, then generate and reiterate feelings about their objects - here, the nation and the feelings it is appropriate to have about it - in naming them. As Ahmed explains in another passage, on disgusting objects, which might be deemed expellable from the body of the nation,

The speech act is always spoken to others, whose shared witnessing of the [in this case] disgusting thing is required for the affect to have an effect. In other words, the subject asks others to repeat the condemnation implicit in the speech act itself. Such a shared witnessing is required for speech acts to be generative, that is, for the attribution of disgust to an object or other to stick to others.

But the repetition of the speech act not only re-affirms the feeling, it is generative of a

community:

... the demand for a witness shows us that the speech act, 'That's disgusting!' generates more than simply a subject and an object; it also generates a community of those who are bound together through the shared condemnation of a disgusting object or event (Ahmed, 2004a/2014, p.94)

Indeed, Ahmed shows how the constitution of particular communities depends precisely upon certain gendered or racialised forms of exclusion. In analysing Iranian Facebook comment threads on sanctions in the data analysis below, I treat them as speech acts which generate ephemeral collectivities, organised around affective patterns of inclusion and exclusion.

Judith Butler (1997a, 1997b, 2010) is a key theorist for the mechanisms of group belonging, not as finished product, but as a performative process, sustained by repetition and citation. Debra Ferreday, in her work *Online belongings* (2011), draws on Butler and also on the work of Elsbeth Probyn (1996) in order to assist her investigation of the affective aspects of online communities, the 'longing' inherent in belonging (Fortier 1996, cited in Ferreday, 2011). Probyn is likewise interested in the ways in which 'individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state' (Probyn, 1996, p.19). Several scholars have noted how the thought of belonging to a community may involve or reflexively generate wishful feelings. In the work of Toennies, community- *gemeinschaft* – was contrasted with the atomistic forms of modern society, or *gesellschaft* (Toennies [1887] 1979, cited in Kendall 2011, p.309).

As Lori Kendall notes, writing on online forms of belonging, '[c]ommunity evokes empathy, affection, support, interdependence, consensus, shared values, and proximity.' (Kendall, 2011, p.309) By the same token, however, such strong affective associations engender scepticism, a suspicion that the community is not 'real' or 'authentic'.

Fernback, for example, asserts that the 'concept of online community . . . has become increasingly hollow as it evolves into a pastiche of elements that ostensibly "signify" community' (2007, cited in Kendall, 2011, p.310). Jodi Dean argues that '[a]ffective networks produce feelings of community or what we might call "community without community". They enable mediated relationships that take a variety of changing, uncertain, and interconnected forms as they feed back each upon the other in ways we can never fully account for or predict.' (Dean, 2010, p.22) Thus the term 'community' is often held to circulate as a sign without a referent, invoking values associated with authenticity and 'commitment' without necessarily putting those values into practice.

Most scholars, however, avoid what might be regarded as the authenticity/inauthenticity trap, instead focusing pragmatically on the norms and styles of belonging, rather than evaluating their genuineness. Barbara Rosenwein, a medieval historian, has developed the concept of 'emotional communities' (2010a, 2010b) which seems to us useful also for the study of virtual communities or forms of belonging. If one temptation is to evaluate how 'authentic' or sincere textual statements 'actually' are - such as statements or practices connoting belonging, in this case - Rosenwein usefully refocuses attention on the 'norm': 'If an emotion is the standard response of a particular group in certain instances, the question should not be whether it betrays real feeling but rather why one norm obtains over another.' (2010a, p.21) Similarly, Anderson, who as we saw, argues that all communities larger than a village are imagined, notes that '[c]ommunities are to

be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.’ (Anderson, 1991, p.6) What one can do is to observe how certain emotives (Reddy, 2001) and emotional styles – in other words, certain representational claims about the emotions the person is feeling - operate to cement or divide a group, and to reinforce or disrupt given sets of normative meanings, which are necessarily both discursive and affective.

Here Ferreday’s approach also converges with Rosenwein’s and Anderson’s, but Ferreday adds the dimension of performative citation: ‘[b]y paying attention to the ways in which specific online communities create norms, and provide spaces in which their members are able to “cite” those norms, it should become possible to explain how those communities work to produce a sense of identification in the user...’ (Ferreday, 2011, p.29). As she also points out, however, at the same time it is necessary to understand how ‘belonging sometimes fails, and to make visible the processes by which some subjects might feel excluded or rejected by particular communities’ (Ferreday, 2011, p.30). In Ahmed’s terms (2004), why do affective labels stick to some bodies and not to others? In Deleuzian terms, why do affective intensities not necessarily generate similar significations?

Regimes of affect

Affect is typically equated with intensities, the halo effect surrounding moods or emotions. But intensities too have their disciplinary regimes and appropriate displays (Gunew, 2009, quoted in Pedwell, 2014, p.133).

For this research, a key aspect of the focus on affect is to see how it is instrumentalised in regimes of governmentality, a concept which Foucault (2009) elaborated in the course of his work on the disciplining and regulating of bodies and minds (Lemke, 2002, 2016). Governmentality involves, in this conceptualisation, the exercise of biopower, the regulation of populations. In recent years, a number of scholars have drawn on Foucault's work to examine how affect is utilised by modern institutions. I therefore review here the work done on biopolitical regimes in their emotional and affective aspects in order to elucidate the advantages of such a focus. I find these concepts helpful, especially in Chapter Six, in discussing affects as operationalised at both national and transnational level in the discourses of Iranian and Western political and media institutions.

In the discussion of William Reddy's (2001) work above, we looked at how the notion of 'emotives' as statements both denote and perform emotional states. Emotives are not simply 'produced' or originated by individuals; rather, they are usually strongly shaped by the dominant emotional norms governing human social groups at particular times and in particular spaces. These norms usually relate to each other in a coherent structure which Reddy calls an 'emotional regime' (no explicit connection to Foucault is made here, a point I return to below). Any system of political rule, in order to be stable, 'must establish as an essential element a normative order for emotions' (Reddy,

2001, p.124) – for example, particular forms of patriotism or loyalty to the monarch. These prescribed norms, however, may conflict with the goals of individuals and groups, who then often seek ‘refuge’ from such regimes in alternative ‘structures of feeling’, to employ Raymond Williams’ influential term (Williams, 1977). This focus is significant, for two reasons: 1) relations between the individual and the social are theorised as complex and sometimes in tension; 2) historical change is linked to *shifts in which feelings are favoured*. The first point, though potentially productive, relies somewhat on an individual-society binary, which is resisted by many scholars (including Ahmed, 2004a/2014 above). But the second point is of real import in terms of how we analyse the shifts in the ways Iranians emotionally attach to the nation within the period of a few years, from the repression of 2009 to the conclusion of the sanctions talks in 2015.

Scholars of more Foucauldian inclinations associate themselves with an alternative term – ‘affective regime’. Firstly, since affect is a somewhat broader term than emotion, such an approach is less committed to focusing on named emotions. This does not stop scholars operating in this framework from working on emotions such as pity (Chouliaraki, 2006) or empathy (Pedwell, 2014), but it also means that Wendy Brown for example, can write about regimes of tolerance (2006), even though tolerance, while clearly affective, is often identified as a political or ethical stance rather than as a separate category of emotion. Secondly, the term relates explicitly to Foucault’s concern with biopolitical regimes of governmentality as forms of modern power which regulate the lives of populations (Foucault, 2009). This is where differences emerge with liberal humanists such as Reddy, who sees his ‘emotional regimes’ as being largely imposed by dominant elites, usually at state level, upon human subjects who may well

suffer as they experience their own personal emotions as not wholly conforming to those desired (2001). For Chouliaraki, however, as for Foucault, these differentiated forms of feeling and practice are already produced by the operations of power itself, which is, in this view, much more heterogeneous and less centralised than in either liberal or Marxist models. As she explains,

the object of analysis (the State), ceases to be conceived of as a totality of functions and ideologies of domination and becomes the study of specific regimes of practice with local power effects on people. These regimes of practice are not homogeneous, but are composed of minor activities, technologies and forms of meaning that stand in complicated relationships with one another and result in multiple and ambivalent effects of power – effects of freedom as well as subjectification (Chouliaraki, 2006, p.60).¹²

This approach is useful for our analysis of social media in directing us to ‘effects of freedom as well as subjectification’ – the extent to which affective regimes are not only shaping, but contested – and to an extent which Foucault would recognise – create effects of contestation, partly by the clash between political forms of emotionality. I argue, indeed, that affective political discourse around the election in 2013 of the Rouhani government, creates a ‘compassionate’ Rouhani-led state as opposed to the

¹² Wendy Brown, in her work on tolerance, summarises ‘Foucault’s account of governmentality as that which organizes “the conduct of conduct” at a variety of sites and through rationalities not limited to those formally countenanced as political. Absent the precise dictates, articulations, and prohibitions associated with the force of law, tolerance nevertheless produces and positions subjects, orchestrates meanings and practices of identity, marks bodies, and conditions political subjectivities. This production, positioning, orchestration, and conditioning is achieved not through a rule or a concentration of power, but rather through the dissemination of tolerance discourse across state institutions; civic venues such as schools, churches, and neighborhood associations; ad hoc social groups and political events; and international institutions or forums.’ (Brown, 2006, p.4) For tolerance, one could substitute the words ‘compassion’ or ‘empathy’, as I discuss further below.

non-empathetic affective regimes of Western and previous local governments. The form of the national imaginary that is thus reworked, which includes a public organised around the notion of vulnerability, can be seen as the product both of affective regimes and of the affective-political contestation which these regimes incite.

In her discussion of tolerance as a biopolitical regime, Wendy Brown proposes that we surrender

an understanding of tolerance as a transcendent or universal concept, principle, doctrine, or virtue so that it can be considered instead as a political discourse and practice of governmentality that is historically and geographically variable in purpose, content, agents, and objects. (Brown, 2006, p.4).

Tolerance is the example here, but this passage could very well be rewritten as a generalisation about affects or affective-cognitive attitudes or modes. Thus Carolyn Pedwell (2014, 2015) analyses empathy as operating transnationally through affective regimes, but argues against empathy as ‘transcendent or universal concept’. As we discuss in Chapter Six, on sanctions in their associations with affective regimes, affects such as empathy or trust are unequally distributed via specific political practices.

Likewise with pity. In *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (2006), Chouliaraki examines how Western audiences engage in different types of spectatorship of suffering through viewing television coverage of disasters, usually in the ‘Third World’ or global South. She explores the relationship between power relations and the affect of pity.

Specifically she introduces the term ‘regimes of pity’, which involve, in Wetherell’s

(2012) terms, meaning-making or affective-discursive practices. These regimes are ‘analytic constructs that help us to describe the systematic semiotic choices by which the spectacle of suffering becomes meaningful to spectators’ (Chouliaraki, 2006, p.74). Regimes of pity, which, like Reddy’s emotional regimes, favour certain forms of emotions over others, become forms of governmentality when they aid in the control of populations, both in the West and in the global South, through organising affective forms of political involvement whereby populations in the South are characterised (or not) as worthy of pity and hence of aid. She analyses how 9/11 was represented in the media as an attack on ‘us’, the West, engendering qualitatively different – and superior – forms of empathy and pity. What is useful here is that she traces the ways in which media technologies and institutions construct a repertoire of certain kinds of affect that have political functions. In this study, however, I focus on ‘empathy’ (as in the speeches of Obama, discussed in Chapter Six below), for its concealment of the power relations it can operationalise, given that empathy *appears* as less hierarchical, more egalitarian, than pity.

In conceptualising my argument, I will connect regimes of empathy and compassion to questions of grievability and livability. Judith Butler, in *Frames of War* (2010) focuses on the US media in order to trace ‘how affect is regulated to support both the war effort and, more specifically, nationalist belonging’ as part of ‘representational regimes’ (Butler, 2010, p.40). For her, media images and reporting (re)stimulate ‘affective responses [such as grief and outrage] that are highly regulated by regimes of power’ (2010, p.39). In these affective schemas, only some lives are significant and hence grievable. Grievability in Butler’s account reads as: ‘specific lives [which] cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives

do not qualify as lives, or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense.’ (Butler, 2010, p.1) Thus, the right to grievability underpins a worthy life. It is Adi Kuntsman who felicitously characterises these operations of power, in Butler’s framework, as ‘regimes of grievability’ (2011, 2012). In such regimes, the validity of the evidence concerning the suffering and death of those considered less worthy (in Kuntsman’s example, Palestinians) is continually questioned (2011, 2012). I shall analyse in subsequent chapters how Western political and media institutions frame Iranian sanctions in terms that avoid reference to past and present suffering, except where the purpose is to threaten a tightening up of sanctions in the future.

In the previous sections, I argued for a view of affect as discursively and performatively organised in practices which are constitutive of individual and collective subjectivities. The notion of affective regimes enriches this approach by allowing us to see more clearly how power regulates bodies in everyday social practice, without recourse to law or diktat. Indeed, this model does not require anything so crude as a central authority prescribing to subjects what they should feel – although, as we shall see in our study of the data, that may be important too!

Intimate publics

Lauren Berlant has developed the term ‘intimate publics’ to conceptualise the ways in which American (and latterly European) citizens are affectively attached to dreams and fantasies of the good life. This concept goes beyond the deployment of intimacy by politicians such as Clinton or Obama in order to connect with their publics (Woodward, 2004; Escobar, 2011; Pedwell 2014), though it may include such phenomena. These publics are structured not only around a sense of shared feelings, but around narrative genres mediated via mass culture, structures of expectation which not only shape cultural texts, but one’s experience itself, considered as a form of cultural text. In this approach, a genre such as melodrama or romance ‘is always a scene of potentiality, a promise of a certain affective experience’ (2008a, p.271) , ‘an aesthetic structure of affective expectation’ (2008a, p.4) , ‘an affective contract’ (2011, p.66) around which intimate publics form themselves.¹³

Thus the ways in which publics and genres function, in Berlant’s work, are more complex than are the operations of disciplinary regimes of affect, at least as they have been framed in the literature. In existing scholarly work, disciplinary regimes foreclose, they are prescriptive - they name and prescribe the favoured types of emotion and feeling- grief, empathy, pity (see Butler, 2004, 2010; Chouliaraki, 2006 – though Pedwell, 2014, arguably has a more nuanced approach). Genres are also prescriptive, to

¹³ Berlant cites Jameson as one of her inspirations for the study of genre (Berlant, 2008a, p.284, fn10). For Jameson, ‘Genres are essentially... social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact. The speech acts of daily life are themselves marked with indications and signals... which ensure their appropriate reception’ (1981, p.92). This is a key insight concerning the relation between literature as social practice and the practices of everyday life. Berlant also references (ibid.) feminist film studies, particularly the work done on the genres of melodrama and the ‘woman’s film’, and their relation to the construction of subjectivities (for example, Doane, 1987,1991, and the pioneering compilations edited by Landy, 1991 and Gledhill, 1987).

a degree, but what is often missed about genres, Berlant argues, is that they incite longing, which has an element of excess (2008a); they have a structure of expectation which is affective, which mobilises a sense of potential and openness, rather than being tied only to particular named emotions. This excess or potential, however, far from subverting the order of discourse, or promising liberation, as in Papacharissi's account (2014), actually works, most of the time, to reinforce the existing order. So 'utopianism' may be 'in the air' (2008a, p.5) 'but one of the main utopias is normativity itself' understood to be 'a felt condition of general belonging and an aspirational site of rest and recognition in and by a social world' (2008a, p.5). In drawing on Berlant's notions of shared 'longing' as key to the formation of genres and publics, I note the partial convergence here with the approaches of Probyn (1996) and Ferreday (2011), who also emphasise the 'longing', the element of desire and projective fantasy, in belonging.

In the conceptual framework of this thesis, I argue, through analysis of Facebook comments, that an intimate public forms itself around the figure of Javad Zarif, the chief sanctions negotiator for the Iranian side. He becomes associated with a new affective investment in the Iranian government and state as compassionate and hence a new affective genre of compassion. In this genre, the Iranian government recognises the people's misery and will release them from it by ending sanctions. Framed in this way, Zarif is an object of shared feeling, to whom affective attributes 'stick', in Ahmed's terms (2004a/2014), whilst in a Berlantian framework, he, and via him, the state, become objects of desire, to which attachment is secured through 'a cluster of promises' concerning a potential future (Berlant, 2011, p.23). The genre of compassion here involves an expectational structure of affective excess that works to maintain

attachment in the object. 'All attachments are optimistic', Berlant argues (ibid); however, some objects of attachment are 'significantly problematic' (ibid., p.24), in that they constitute in themselves an obstacle to achieving the form of living that they promise. It in this sense that Berlant speaks of a 'cruel' optimism. The extent to which the Rouhani government, through its empathetic promises around sanctions, generates a cruel optimism, is for the Iranian public to decide, as I discuss in the Conclusion. It is noticeable, however, as I explain in Chapter Four, that a host of political-affective themes is subsumed in the delineation of sanctions as exceptional crisis, to which I now turn.

Crisis and the national imaginary

I explore, in this thesis, sanctions as affective crisis at the level of the national imaginary, analysing online comments around the sanctions negotiations as pertaining to a crisis in the narration of the national subject. Here, I draw on Lauren Berlant's analysis of crisis - via American narratives of the economic crisis of 2008 - in its affective and discursive mediations, for the ways in which it disturbs and disrupts existing stories of lives (2011) and translates into everyday existence as that which is felt to be 'overwhelming' (2011, p.10). She resists, however, the temptation to see every crisis as 'traumatic' (2011, p.101), instead focusing on the historico-political in its imbrication with the ordinary, or what she calls 'crisis ordinariness', the ways in which people negotiate and live with what threatens to be overwhelming. Nonetheless, these personal narratives are attached, in her view, to the larger national narrative, and there is a collective investment in restoring coherence to the bigger signifying chain (to use a Lacanian term) of the national imaginary, even if the successful attainment of such an

outcome is shrouded in doubt. Thus new attachments form to new objects of desire, such as celebrities, or politician-celebrities, while older attachments, principally to the dream of the ‘good life’, subsist and endure, despite there being little basis now for such attachments. My argument differs from Berlant’s in some respects, in that she analyses her narratives as responses to a crisis that is first of all objectively real. I argue instead, based on analysis of Farsi Facebook comments, that sanctions are *produced* as ‘new’ crisis, given that crisis has arguably been endemic in the Iranian national narrative, although it is arguable when this feeling began. Certainly, forms of insecurity, vulnerability and precarity associated with war, the threat of war, political repression, poverty and (since the 1990s) economic neoliberalism have been endemic since the revolution of 1979. This is not at all to deny that sanctions on Iran have had lethal and damaging consequences (I discuss these consequences in the Introduction). But I argue that the very identification of sanctions on Iran as a ‘new’ crisis at government and popular levels allows the generation of ‘new’ affects: firstly, affects of vulnerability and precarity oriented primarily around sanctions; and secondly, new forms of hope that this precarity will end or be mitigated with the promised relief of sanctions. As discussed above, these affects are attached to new objects, particularly the Rouhani government and its foreign minister Javad Zarif, in an affective-discursive formation of the *compassionate state*. In this scenario, the hope is that the coherence of the national imaginary may be (re)constituted –and the comments on my chosen Facebook pages may be interpreted as contributing to the formation of that ever-fragile signifying chain.

Conclusion

In evaluating a range of scholarly approaches to affect and politics, I have found most useful the approaches that analyse communicative utterances, such as social media comments, as manifestations of affective-discursive social practices (Wetherell, 2012) involving speech acts (Ahmed, 2004a; Austin, 1962), which in their frequent invocation of emotions, repeatedly and performatively cite meanings and identities. Speech acts are performative in that they cite, signify and stage emotions for a social and communicable purpose. These citations, however, may not always work - or they will not have the same affective-discursive impact on all members of the social group in question. In this vein, the Facebook message threads that I examine are politically contested event-spaces where objects such as the West or the nuclear programme will have different feelings attached to them, depending on the commentator's affiliations, with the affective cues being provided by the news story, and the changing political and historical context. In the data analysis chapters, I will draw on Judith Butler's approach in *Frames of War* (2010), where she examines how categories of 'us' and 'them' can be created through the performative, reiterative classification of bodies and lives as either grievable or non-grievable. I will examine Farsi Facebook comments as performances which create new categories of 'us' and 'them' within the framework of the discursive production of national crisis, where the grievability of Iranian lives is acknowledged at the level of the government. I see this empathetic acknowledgement as contesting the operation of global - and previous local - affective regimes, which are perceived to have withheld empathy from suffering bodies. It is this perception of empathy that allows the formation of intimate and vulnerable publics around the cluster of wish-feelings and promises attached to the government.

Chapter Two: Social Media: Online Publics and the Question of Affect

Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that current scholarly approaches to social media have neglected to pick up on significant affective-discursive patterns online which are not related to ‘coherent’ and ‘recognisable’ forms of politicisation. I note that a focus on political mobilisation in relation to social media, though necessary, has resulted in a lack of attention to what happens when, as in Iran after 2009, a social movement is defeated, leaving significant political disorientation in its wake. Part of the problem is the presumption that contested and meaningful politics only occur when there is a healthy public sphere, characterised by rational deliberation (Habermas, 1991). My argument, then, that existing approaches may not pay enough attention to the all too frequent contexts, such as Iran after the fall of the Green Movement in 2009 and during the most severe sanctions from 2010, where there is a lack of contestatory offline physical presence to stimulate an online-offline dialectic such as has been justly celebrated in studies of recent movements (Castells, 2012/2015; Gerbaudo, 2012). But politics still takes place in ‘unhealthy’ political situations, where debate is not so often framed in rational, Habermasian terms, where there are no clearly available ‘bottom-up’ political alternatives, where publics are not coherent, but fragmented. A tendency towards binaristic ‘either/or’ thinking when it comes to the study of online publics is exacerbated, I suggest, when it comes to the Middle East, by the assumption that social media are indicators of modernisation and democratisation, so that if they are not spaces of dissidence, they simply become spaces of repression and manipulation by

authoritarian regimes. In such frameworks, affect and emotion, I suggest below, may either be viewed as marshalled in the service of ‘rational’ political objectives, manipulated by corporate and state interests, or romanticised as subverting the discursive order.

If this is the case, then, the question remains as to what approaches might be useful for the study of online publics and their forms of affectivity, outside of exceptional historical moments of revolt – in other words for research into publics involved in sometimes unproductive, yet often creative attachments, standing in ambiguous relation to regimes of power. Here, some recent work Middle Eastern social media offers encouraging signs of engaging with the affective in its ambivalences and complexity (Gerbaudo, 2012; Faris and Rahimi, 2015). Finally, in this chapter, I return to Lauren Berlant’s notion of intimate publics (2008a, 2011) in order to develop a basis for conceptualising and analysing the kinds of Iranian political subjectivity, organised around ideas of the suffering nation, that emerged around sanctions conceived as national crisis. The characteristics of such subjectivities - as being affective, fragmented, transient, and vulnerably open to the contingency of pain and loss - mean they are easily dismissed or overlooked by those seeking coherent, deliberative, modern political subjects.

As Gholam Khiabany has argued, study of communications in the Middle East has revolved around two paradigms 1) that communication technology is an index of modernisation 2) that Iran and much of the rest of the Middle East has rejected a major aspect of modernity in turning to Islam, which is taken to be a timeless cultural essence (Sreberny, 2001; Khiabany, 2010, pp.1-8) and away from ‘secular’ democracy,

understood restrictively as participation in elections. This model, which emerged between the 1950s and 1970s, cast the Middle East ‘as a homogenous space structured by a monolithic “Islamic” culture’ (Matar and Bessaïso, 2012, p.195) Hence it ignored the spaces of public discussion that form on the streets, in cafes, on public transport, on an everyday basis, and assumed that the mass media and its associated technologies (print, broadcasting, and, later, digital media) would function as a driver of modernisation and secularisation (see also Sreberny, 2008; Khiabany, 2010; Matar, 2012). There was a strong strand of Cold War developmentalism in such notions:

The developmentalist thesis held that the media were resources which would, along with urbanization, education, and other social forces mutually stimulate economic, social, and cultural modernization in the less developed world. As a result, media growth was viewed as an index of development (Mosco, 2009, quoted in Matar and Bessaïso, 2012, p.206)

The rise of social media in the Islamic Republic of Iran has, then, been treated with fascination at such an apparent contradiction, mixed with celebration for what this is taken to mean about the supposed Westernisation of the country, on the presumption that social media equals modernisation equals Westernisation, and Islam equals tradition (see Shakhsari, 2010). The next step, then, was to represent social media as part of a heroic attempt to carve out a public sphere against the structures of the Islamic Republic, frequently reified as a ‘typical’ Middle Eastern authoritarian state, to the detriment of more complex interpretations.

In much of this scholarship, the state has often been taken to mean a fixed entity,

and classified as either authoritarian or democratizing, moderate or radical, powerful or weak, paying little attention to the complexity of state structures and institutions, the nature of the state's repressive dynamics, the role of the state as an instrument of the ruling classes and capital and vice versa, and its relationship to and role in cultural practices, a relationship that also changes according to contexts (Matar and Bessaïso, 2012, p.196).

In *Blogistan* (2010), the first book on Iranian social media, Gholam Khiabany and Annabelle Sreberny treated sceptically the notion that every blogger was a dissident, or that social media in itself should be taken as the sign of a revolt against the state. They also highlighted the role of what they called 'embedded intellectuals', in other words, supporters of the conservatives who promoted their views on social media. In other words, *Blogistan* endeavoured to complicate what is still an overly binaristic and Eurocentric representation. In recent years, blogging has been eclipsed by the rise of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Telegram (Faris and Rahimi, 2015; Seddighi and Tafakori, 2016), but the presumption in mainstream media is still that social media, as indexes of modernity, must inevitably conflict with the institutions of the Islamic Republic, as witness the recent overexcited media speculation that the Islamic Republic was going to ban all social media. A *Huffington Post* article even stated that Iranians themselves could not even access the posts of Javad Zarif, the foreign minister:

Of course, it is not Zarif's fingers on the keyboard, it is his team. But it is his message. And who reads his messages. Not the people of Iran. The people of Iran never legally see these postings — they are blocked. The postings are for your eyes and my eyes and for the rest of the Western world. (Halpern, 2016)

The statement that the people of Iran do not read Zarif's messages, only the Western world is not only false, but to say the least, difficult to sustain, given that Zarif's messages are in Farsi (more recently, in English too).¹⁴ If the Iranian government is using social media, the argument seems to run, the intention can only be to 'manipulate' (Halpern, 2016) the West, whereas similar statements would not be made quite so readily about the foreign policy objectives of Western politicians who are active on social media. The point I wish to make is that if the alternatives widely posited as facing Iran are either modernity or backwardness, the corresponding binary in relation to social media is either dissidence or repression/manipulation.

Studies of social media in intersection with social movements

Such binarisms also marked prominent studies of social media in the wake of the Arab revolts of 2011. Certainly, the dramatic character of these upsurges did little to favour academic approaches which focused on political crisis in relation to the mundane and the ordinary, a case in point being Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), published that same year, which concentrated mainly on the disruption of American fantasies of the 'good life' by the recession. Instead, the focus of research and debate, in relation to the 'Arab Spring', was very much on the role played by the internet in facilitating a 'bottom-up' citizen politics. Affect plays an important role in the more recent work of two scholars, Manuel Castells, (2012/2015), and Zoe Papacharissi (2010, 2014), whose perspectives differ significantly, yet at certain points converge unexpectedly. What

¹⁴ I focus on Zarif's Farsi Facebook page because this was the main element in his social media profile in 2013-15, used for giving routine reports during the sanctions negotiations; Halpern is referring to Zarif's more recent use of Twitter, in English as well as Farsi.

these two approaches have in common, I argue, is a Eurocentric modernisation paradigm which has as its driver and goal individual autonomy.

Castells' *Networks of Outrage and Hope* (2012/2015) examines the part played by social media in the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings as well as in protests in Europe and the United States. In these cases, he appears to argue, it was the Internet itself that created the stimulus for the offline protests. For him, the 'the Arab uprisings were spontaneous processes of mobilisation that emerged from calls from the Internet and wireless communication networks' (Castells, 2012, p.106). The Occupy movement 'was born on the Internet, diffused by the Internet, and maintained its presence on the Internet' (p.168). He generalises from this that '[t]he networked social movements of our time are largely based on the Internet, a necessary though not sufficient component of their collective action. The digital social networks based on the Internet and on wireless platforms are decisive tools for mobilizing, for organizing, for deliberating, for coordinating and for deciding.' (Castells, 2012, p.229]

Christian Fuchs (2014) accuses Castells of 'techno-euphoria' and 'techno-determinism'. His argument is that he underplays both the social roots of the revolts in neoliberal capitalist crisis – it cannot be proved that they would not have happened without social media - and that the revolts had to materialise offline in order to be effective. Castells, however, in the second edition of *Networks of Outrage and Hope*, vigorously rejects accusations of techno-euphoria, emphasising that it is 'obvious' that '[n]either the Internet, nor any other technology for that matter, can be a source of social causation' (Castells, 2015, p.257) and that the uprisings had to materialise offline in order to be actualised. What is particularly relevant to our project is that he maintains a

Habermasian loyalty to the rational, deliberative ideal, while at the same time highlighting the role of affect in the online and offline public spheres. The social movement's deliberation as a movement, he argues, is made possible by the creation of a space of autonomy, which combines online organisation with a partial conquest of the offline physical space of the city (p.252). Yet it is affect, in the shape of anger and hope, which provides the motivation for the expression of social media dissent; as anger, hope and enthusiasm build, they trump fear to create a movement in offline space (pp.247-8). Castells seems to maintain here an ultimately Enlightenment-derived reason-emotion binary, whereby reason is the guide, while emotions provide the motive power. Also Enlightenment-derived is the concern with autonomy. Given that the *telos* of these processes is the free individual, the way to accomplish this is, seemingly, to unite the affordances the Internet and social media provide in terms of personal freedom, with the political framework of the mass movement, in order to achieve collective freedom. This is an explicitly universalist project, which associates the Internet not only with autonomy, but with modernity itself:

there is a deeper, fundamental connection between the Internet and networked social movements: they share a specific culture, the culture of autonomy, the fundamental cultural matrix of contemporary societies... And the movements we are observing embody the fundamental project of transforming people into subjects of their own lives by affirming their autonomy vis-à-vis the institutions of society (Castells, 2015, p.258).

Here it does seem that Castells' is overwhelmingly positive about the political potential of the Internet, based on its technological affordances. If this is 'techno-euphoria', to

use Fuchs' term, it is also clear that much of the force of Castells' argument derives from an optimism concerning the potential for progress still apparent within contemporary modernity.

Zoe Papacharissi, arguably, shares Castells' preoccupation with individual autonomy, though not in a Habermasian framework. There are superficial similarities, perhaps: Fuchs criticises a Papacharissi study from 2010 - before the Arab uprisings - which suggests that activities such as blogging, online protest campaigns or posting comments on online discussions would constitute 'an expression of dissent with a public agenda[. . .] these potentially powerful acts of dissent emanate from a private sphere of interaction, meaning that the citizen engages and is enabled politically through a private media environment located within the individual's personal and private space' (Papacharissi, 2010, p.131). Fuchs' complaint is that here 'the private sphere becomes the realm of the political. [Papacharissi] overlooks that co-presence and physicality matter also in a networked world. . . [She] reduces collective action to individual action and the public sphere to the private sphere.' (Fuchs, 2014, p.186). Fuchs takes the view that it is deeply problematic to connect an apparent personal autonomy to a democratic politics, given that capitalism has commodified most of the so-called individual, 'private' activities on the Internet, colonising the space in which they occur precisely through social media such as Facebook and Twitter.

But, Papacharissi asks, 'are we not misapplying the potential of online technologies, if we try to retrofit them into civic habits [of deliberative governance] that no longer interest us?' (2010, p.20). Here, she seems to target what she sees as an old-fashioned Habermasian framework. She instead connects the personal space of autonomy

afforded by the Internet and celebrated by Castells precisely with the increased choices made available through consumer capitalism, so that one may, like a digital ‘flaneur’ (p.111), survey and select from a ‘menu’ (p.160) of political campaign options. This autonomy, she argues, is centred upon a strongly centred self, which is clearly both Western and modern in its essence:

Simply put, as citizens of the twenty-first century, we are afforded singular autonomy. This autonomy is the result of the civic demands of our ancestors and the reflexive environment of late modernity. Autonomy is further enhanced by the affordances of convergent technologies, which potentially expand platforms for interaction, avenues for self-expression, and choices and control available to individuals. Autonomy implies self-determination, self-governance, and dependence on the self - all qualities that derive from a strong sense of identity. (Papacharissi, 2010, p.111)

But though ‘our’ identity (secured, apparently, both through ‘our ancestors’ and through simply existing in the 21st century) may be strong, it is nonetheless based on ceaseless choice, on reflexivity. Here, she references Bauman’s notion of ‘liquid living’ in late modernity, defined as ‘constant self-scrutiny, self-critique and self-censure. Liquid life feeds on the self’s dissatisfaction with itself’ (Bauman 2005, cited in Papacharissi, 2010, p.111). The self, though autonomous, constantly has to shift its ground: ‘the liquid citizen flows in a fragmented continuum but does not anchor’ (p.111). The Internet, in Papacharissi’s view, thus facilitates ‘a performative storytelling of the self’ (p.136), a self which is in flux, yet is at the same time pulled towards self-assertion – one that, here, appears to have Byronic or Baudelairean antecedents.

In Papacharissi's more recent book *Affective Publics* (2014), she focuses on the ingredient that was absent from her previous book – the political role of affect. It is her view of the nature of affect itself which appears to sustain her confidence in the replacement of deliberative politics by other models. Here, she adopts a Deleuzian view of the role of affect in social movement politics online. She focuses on social media mobilisations, including the example of Egypt in 2011, as channelling affect rather than facilitating rational debate or organisation, which was Castells' focus (2012, 2015). This focus on affect, however, she sees as an advantage rather than otherwise, analysing collectively produced news feeds on Twitter as the basis of these new affective publics. She grants that there is nothing 'inherently' democratic about the internet (Papacharissi, 2014, p.8), but focuses on the ways in which online media are 'utilised as resources that help accelerate mobilisation' (Papacharissi, 2014, p.8). She argues that online media favour the generation of powerful forms of affective intensity, rather than the deliberation associated with the Habermasian public sphere. In that sense, there is something 'inherent' about the connection between social media and affect, and in arguing this, as she says, she follows scholars like Boyd (2010), Hussein and Howard (2013) and Van Dijck (2013).

Thus, in her study of the use of Twitter during the Egyptian uprising of 2011, Papacharissi emphasises the refrain or choral mode, made possible by social media's affordances, which was repetitive and non-deliberative. In her view, this eventually created a powerful affective narrative of revolution which almost became revolutionary fact:

Retweets, as refrains, are important because by mode of repetition they acquire an intensity that provides the pulse for a growing movement. The force of repetition augments the disruption introduced by a single tweet into ‘an affective intensity capable of overthrowing the entire order of discourse in favour of transformation’ (Papacharissi, 2014, p.54, citing Deleuze, 1995).

Affects, in this Deleuzian frame of reference, acquire a sort of virtue here by being non-linguistic in their essence (though she grants that they inform meaning-making), and therefore not being inexorably implicated in the discursive structures of power. Media technology, here, interweaves with affect because its affordances already encompass ‘actual and virtual’, ‘reality and fantasy’. (Papacharissi, 2014, p.15) Social media, in Papacharissi’s view, favours ‘contagion and virality’, which, not coincidentally, are the attributes of affect for the theorist Brian Massumi. In Massumi’s Deleuzian reading of affect as emergence or potential, this potential usually generates a movement forward, in an emancipatory sense (Massumi, 2002). Affects accumulate in a linear movement, in the form of tweets or comments, which not only repeat, but open up new possibilities. Social media texts are, furthermore, liminal between raw affect and sociality, in that they materialise affective potential in the form of commonly recognisable feelings. As Papacharissi optimistically puts it, ‘The connective affordances of social media then not only activate the in-between bond of publics but enable expression and information sharing that liberates the individual and the collective imaginations.’ (Papacharissi, 2014, p.20) Here, what seems to emerge is a quasi-Romantic teleology of imaginative emancipation, underpinned by a variant of Romantic vitalism: affects that are enabled by social media provide ‘the always-on life beat of a movement in the making’

(Papacharissi, 2014, p.54).¹⁵ Castells, on the other hand, deploys affect within a largely rationalist, Enlightenment, Habermasian approach to the political and thus to the public sphere. Nonetheless, in both perspectives, arguably, social media enable a movement forward, as that which reflects individual autonomy, but also transcends it in a larger project of collective liberation. Thus, even though it would seem that *Affective Publics* represents a clear move away from the idea of the internet as enabling a private sphere (Papacharissi 2010), the shift is not as decisive as all that. The element of continuity lies in her view of social media as that which supplies the ‘in-between bond’ between private and public which Hannah Arendt identified as missing from the modern public sphere (Arendt, 1970, cited in Papacharissi 2010, p.162). Affect, for her, also suggests this bond, and as such is ‘inherently political’ (Papacharissi, 2014, p.16).

The old reason/emotion binary which haunts Western philosophy and politics is in evidence in both positive and negative evaluations of the role of social media in forming new public spaces. Thus Peter Dahlgren (2014) acknowledges Papacharissi’s (2010) and Dean’s (2010) observations concerning the ways in which private consumption activities overlap with public matters on the web, but draws more pessimistic conclusions, stressing the limits of such fluidity and noting a new individualism among users: ‘what she [Papacharissi] calls a new “civic vernacular” I call the solo sphere...’ (Dahlgren, 2014, p.198). For Dahlgren, this is a ‘new habitus’, ‘removed from civic habits of the past’, even ‘a new basis for political participation’, but one which he connects with an undermining of ‘the vitality of democratic political agency’ (Dahlgren, 2014, p.198). Dahlgren’s underlying focus is the internet in advanced capitalist societies

¹⁵ Papacharissi’s approach thus seems to partake of the digital romanticism which is critiqued in Vincent Mosco’s *The Digital Sublime* (2004).

in the West, where the affordances of the internet threaten the balance between the forces of privatised consumption and democratic culture, both of which are taken to have historic roots in the West:

Of course political participation is by no means an exclusively rational enterprise—it engages emotional dimensions as well. The point here simply boils down to the potential for distraction and the fragmentation of thought. It has been the case that throughout the history of democracy most people’s engagement most of the time is not with politics. With the web the competition for attention reaches a new level of intensity (Dahlgren, 2014, p.198).

In this mirror image of Papacharassi’s account, for Dahlgren, emotions are largely associated here with distraction rather than being a potential source of subversion. Emotions, here, seem to be the means by which distraction is engineered- their political potential, in this context, is nugatory. Previously held in check, they are now, via the internet, overstimulated to the point where they frustrate the project of rational public participation. What is needed, I suggest, is a less binary, more nuanced approach to the study of online publics where affect and social media are neither mystified as agents of Western cosmopolitan modernity and autonomy, nor regarded with suspicion as inevitably disfavoured rational deliberation (and, sometimes, offline political action), but which, instead, complicates the study of social media by considering them as spaces traversed and compromised by affective discourses of power, and also as generative of new forms of affective-discursive contestation in ways that are shaped by power.

Paolo Gerbaudo's study *Tweets and the Streets* (2012), arguably focuses in a more balanced way than some of the works cited above on the relationship between online and offline, social movements and everyday politics, and affect and cognition. Gerbaudo is careful to avoid overly celebratory accounts of the role of social media, while nonetheless stressing the aspects of their technological affordances which may be extremely advantageous for particular sorts of movement at particular moments. While he does not focus strongly on affect, he shows an awareness of the importance of the affective dimension. He refers to social media in terms of "their 'personal' orientation, and of the importance of sustaining an imaginary of 'friendship' and 'sharing' in their use" (Gerbaudo, 2012, p.9). This he frames as important not only for political mobilisation *per se*, but for shaping the 'national-popular' imaginary. He thus discusses Egyptian Facebook pages in 2011 as not only developing an 'informal and intimate' language, but as creating 'emotionally charged interactions with their audiences to sustain a process of collective identification among people'. This could then resonate, it is argued at the level of 'the imaginary of the nation and Egyptian-ness' (Gerbaudo, 2012, p.148).¹⁶ Although, Gerbaudo focuses on a highly politicised and active social movement, his approach converges in some respects with that of our study. Moreover, one of the strengths of Gerbaudo's study of movements in Egypt, Spain and the United States is its quiet rejection of any binary distinction between the uses of social media in a Middle Eastern country and in Western countries. Gerbaudo certainly highlights national/regional specificities such as the greater level of repression in Egypt, but also stresses the interregional commonalities between forms of resistance to neo-liberalism as a global regime. Encouragingly, for the study of Farsi social media, David Faris and

¹⁶ Although he stresses that 'identities constructed on [activists'] Facebook pages were characterised by... deep elusivity' (Gerbaudo, 2012, p.148).

Barak Rahimi, the editors of *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society after 2009* (2015), as I discuss below, adopt a similarly transnational standpoint, which endeavours to avoid exoticising or fetishizing the case study material as unique to Iran or the Middle East.

Narratives of social media in Iran

The widespread use of social media in Iran continues to gain attention in both journalistic and academic accounts (Akhavan, 2013; Alavi, 2005; Amir-Ebrahimi, 2004, 2008; Alinejad, 2011; Bucar, Fazaeli 2008; Brzozowski, McCormick, Lasseigne, 2010; Khiabani, Sreberny 2007, 2010; Keddie, 2008; Lerner 2010; Miura, 2007; Du and Wagner, 2006; Shakhsari, 2010; Faris and Rahimi, 2015). Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, however, alerted their readers to the notion that the study of new media technologies in Iran should be combined with attention to contemporary cultural and political dynamics (Sreberny and Khiabany 2011). Since then, this call has been taken up by a number of scholars, for example, in the collection edited by Faris and Rahimi, *Social Media in Iran* (2015) or Niki Akhavan in her *Electronic Iran* (2013).

Faris and Rahimi, in their introduction to *Social Media in Iran: Politics and Society after 2009* (2015) state their purpose to be that of critically examining ‘the social media landscape of a so-called “developing” country, undergoing major changes in the broader context of global communication processes’ (Faris and Rahimi, 2015, p.7). Aware of the perils of reification and essentialism, they are careful to distance themselves from a narrow nationalism, and from any attempt ‘to exoticize a unique Middle East case study’ (Faris and Rahimi, 2015, p.7).

There has also been a welcome caution among some scholars concerning the liberatory potential of social media in an Iranian context. Rahimi (2011, 2012), Akhavan (2013), and Khiabany (2010) have warned that attention to social media as a site of ‘bottom-up’ activism should be accompanied by awareness of the ways in which the Iranian state is both using social media itself and surveilling the citizen-generated material that is permitted to exist. Shakhsari (2010) also drew attention to the input of Western institutions into much of the online content generated in the diaspora. These points are addressed by this project insofar as we focus on ‘impure’, mixed-genre sites that can be seen - and are seen – as linked to the Iranian and British states respectively. In addition, Rahimi (2011) and Akhavan (2013) warn that the ‘apolitical’ nature of much of the everyday digital content should not be underestimated. While this may be true in some sense, my approach, as already suggested, diverges somewhat from normative conceptions of the political.

In the case of Facebook, it has been pointed out that its structure and usage as a social media platform, which is taken to be primarily based on user-driven informal networks built on ‘trust’, has tended to favour the participation of Iranian women, especially educated women (Kermani, 2012, cited in Eloranta, et al., 2015, p.31). The generation of digital content by Iranian women thus tends to be discussed in terms of a broadly optimistic narrative of social advance; online activity is framed in terms of the general progression of Iranian women towards bodily and social liberation. As an account by a women’s rights activist puts it:

Iranian women who are limited in the public sphere by strict Islamic laws, hijab,

and cultural mores create a temporal reality through the Internet in which they are free to roam around and express themselves in a liberated way. (Gheytonchi, 2015, p.43)

The notion of liberation, into a world which permits freedom to roam, bases itself on a distinction between ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ worlds, which has been justly critiqued in a variety of contexts. Certainly, the author cautions against ‘naïve expectations’ of the internet as a ‘utopia’ for Iranian women (Gheytonchi, 2015, p.52), but nonetheless conveys an impression of a process of democratisation that is cumulative and ‘irreversible’:

the sheer number of women engaging in blogging, social networking, and photosharing has led to an alternative virtual public sphere in which the Islamic rule of the state is constantly contested (Gheytonchi, 2015, p.53).

A rather less nuanced article on ‘Iran’s sexual revolution’ in the *New Statesman*, adopts a classic ‘hydraulic’ model of sexuality, describing how, like alcohol, it flows and spreads outwards from ‘liberal’, middle-class areas:

As with anything that is suppressed or banned – such as alcohol, which flows through homes the length and breadth of the city – people have learned to sidestep the restrictions. And they are hungrier than ever for that which is not allowed. There is a sexual awakening in Tehran, and it is spreading beyond the rich, northern foothills of the city, where the more liberal and secular families live (Navai, 2014).

These ‘natural sexual urges’, the article argues, will burst out somewhere even if there are restrictions imposed. Her article thus exemplifies the Freudian ‘repressive hypothesis’ critiqued by Foucault (1998) for its ahistoricism and asociality. Interestingly, Khiabany (2010), has commented on the overdetermined nature of narratives linking women’s bodies to the arrival of modernity:

If the Pahlavi dynasty tried to announce its arrival at ‘modern times’ by introducing and imposing ‘deveiling’ (1936), the first act of the Islamic Republic, which replaced it, was to introduce and impose ‘re-veiling’ (1980). The first act was celebrated as the ‘passing of tradition’, and the second as the ‘passing of modernity’. The script could not have been written better! (2010, p.182)

In this sense, balanced scholarly evaluation of phenomena in Iranian civil society is especially difficult, given the frequent pressure to engage in celebration of what is perceived as modern, or to lament the advances of the forces of ‘tradition’. A more recent case in point is the Green movement (*Jonbeshe-e sabz*). Both an uprising and a social movement, the Green movement was triggered in the wake of the presidential election of June 2009, when Mir-Hussain Mousavi, one of the candidates, challenged the official election results, which gave the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, an overwhelming 64 percent of the vote. From the outset, there had been widespread hope that there would be repetition of 1997, when the reformist Khatami was elected (Dabashi, 2010, 2011; Rahimi, 2011). These hopes only grew stronger during a campaign marked by strong youth participation, social media activity and a

carnavalesque street presence, especially in Tehran and other major cities. In the aftermath of what was widely seen as a stolen election, this offline and online activism swiftly took the form of social revolt. Far from a ‘cyber revolution’ taking place, as Western commentators tended to assume, ‘[c]yberspace did not serve as an engine that ran the street protests; rather, [what took place] was the overlapping of oppositional activities in both physical and virtual spaces’ (Rahimi, 2011, p.167). By the end of 2009, however, the offline activity was largely replaced by a growth in online activism as state repression increased. As Rahimi (2011) describes, however, the conservatives within the state developed a concerted online counter-offensive of their own, launching new pro-government sites, including weblogs, around which virtual communities coalesced, at the same time as they monitored and obstructed opposition activity online.

Babak Rahimi (2011) argues that the Green movement exemplified the ways in which social media are not

mere tools of communication that can simply be used for political activism [but] present inventive ways of practicing politics by shaping spaces of contestation... [These] contested spaces... involve social exchanges, discourses, ideas, and images as loci for creating, challenging, and negotiating power relations that define social and political life (Rahimi, 2011, p.160).

These spaces, he argues, are marked - and were marked, in 2009 - by ‘spontaneity’, dynamism and creativity, as ‘individuals momentarily break out of their institutional realities’ and form ‘a transient public’, in processes which ‘subvert the everyday notions of politics’ (Rahimi, 2011, p.160). Here, he links the technological affordances of

social media, including its facilitation of user-generated content, to the creativity of human social agents. It is significant that he links creativity and dynamism to the non-everyday ephemerality of these interactions and the transience of publics. Here he explicitly connects the 2009 revolt with the Arab revolts of 2011, and sees parallels between them. Rahimi does not, it should be said, engage in naive celebration of the citizen power of the internet: he draws attention to the inequality of the forces (states and citizens) contesting this space, and the ambiguity of online experience, caught between forces of ‘empowerment and disempowerment’ (Rahimi, 2011, p.164). There is, however, a hint of cyber-utopianism to his argument here, as he quotes Vincent Mosco in *The Digital Sublime* on how the internet provides strongly mythic spaces and experiences that ‘animate individuals and societies by providing paths to transcendence that lift people out of the banality of everyday life’ (Mosco, 2004, cited in Rahimi, 2011, p.173). It is necessary, I would argue, to critique this binary distinction between mass politicisation and the banal everyday. What this study focuses on, drawing on Lauren Berlant (2008a, 2011), is the imbrication of the historical with everyday lived experience, in the genres of its narration on social media. However, the link between politically dynamic spaces and the attribute of transience is a suggestive one. On Facebook comment streams, each user usually leaves a small footprint and disappears, but as the archive builds up over the course of a few minutes or hours, the effect, which may be the accumulated, performed, affective utterances of a transient public, is cumulative, and by no means based on instantaneity.

Rahimi’s approach entertains the notion of the affective and the digital as combining to ameliorate the effect of official repression of the offline public sphere:

In many ways, the mitigation of political boundaries fosters new relations of virtual interactivity on the basis of emotive ties or what Mousavi would refer to as *mohabbat va olfat-e ijtema'I* or 'social empathy and affinity' (Rahimi, 2011, p.169).

But he cautions that:

In many ways, state online activism continues to expand into the virtual communal domain, wherein governance is no longer merely about regulating content but creating new subjectivities and a community of emotions with solidarity for the divine right of the supreme leader to maintain power' (Rahimi, 2011, p.172).

In warning that affect may be marshalled for different and possibly undesirable political outcomes, Rahimi adopts a balanced approach which does not over-emphasise either the state or civil society:

bonds and solidarities are constructed in fluid ways that enable political movements and state actors to produce various language games, performative and symbolic utterances that contest and invert relationships in correlation with other (offline) sites. As the Iranian case of (post)election politics of dissent best demonstrates, social network sites create such a spatial paradigm for political action by creating ambiguous experiences of empowerment and disempowerment amid shifting state and society relations (Rahimi, 2011, p.164).

Interestingly, in the introduction to the more recent collection *Social Media in Iran* (2015), Faris and Rahimi argue that ‘contemporary Iran is... multifaceted and interconnected... to transnational processes that entail shifting relations between normative structures and mediated affects, between identity and politics, between self and reality’ (Faris and Rahimi, 2015, p.7). Here, the suggestion is that an approach which includes consideration of ‘mediated affects’ in a transnational context will emphasise change and fluidity over stasis, as it analyses the relation between these ‘affects’ and ‘identity’ and potentially oppressive ‘normative structures’ that may govern Iranian online environments. Hence, the attempt is made to maintain a flexible and nuanced analytic framework which avoids either undue pessimism concerning structure or unwarranted optimism concerning agency. In this framework, there is an appropriately qualified and cautious support for the notion that ‘democratic deliberation’ may occur:

while acknowledging the limitations of digital public spheres, the chapters in this volume certainly lend credence to the idea that democratic deliberation, mobilization, and advocacy can take place even under extraordinarily intense limitations imposed by an authoritarian regime. (Faris and Rahimi, 2015, p.6)

Here, it is acknowledged that the online environment may afford more opportunities for such discussion, given the restrictions placed on offline gatherings. These restrictions are discussed elsewhere in the volume by David Faris (2015) as connected to attempts to stifle, first, the reform movement associated with President Khatami (1997-2005) and then the Green movement of 2009. It is this context, then, that Faris and Rahimi argue that the practices of online connectivity between gays and between disabled people in

Iran, given the restrictions placed upon both groups in the offline sphere, tend to confirm Papacharissi's point that 'activities that were once significant in the public domain are increasingly performed in the private sphere, where [digital] connections link "the personal with the political, and the self to the polity and society."' (Papacharissi, 2010, cited in Faris and Rahimi, 2015, p.9)

Here, again, due caution is required concerning the possibilities for individual engagement in discussions of wider societal significance. Interesting, in this respect, is Sima Shahrokni's notion of 'fluid publics'. In her article (2012), she describes the highly politicised nature of everyday discussion under Middle Eastern authoritarian governments. This, she argues, is usually under-estimated by Western-based commentators, who prefer to think that if public life is so depoliticised under 'liberal democracies', this must be even more the case under authoritarian regimes. Shahrokni develops the term 'fluid publics' to describe the ephemeral but vigorous public debates in taxis, bus stations, shops and hair salons in Iran. These debates may lack coherence, may be formally unconnected and fragmentary, yet in the example she gives, the use of opinion polls by reformists in the Khatami government (1997-2005), allowed a unified, conscious and politically influential reformist counter-public to form out of the myriad and transient publics that animate Iranian daily life.

Interestingly, a very similar framework to Shahrokni's was posited by Mir Hossein Mousavi, the central figure of the Green movement, envisaging an online space of deliberation that paralleled offline spaces (this was briefly referred to above). In the aftermath of the 2009 events, these statements were made in specific reference to Facebook:

It is very similar to traditional bazaars where countless stores and booths of varying size are connected, along with mosques and teahouses, to produce an image of one coherent structure, despite the differences in every unit. What is interesting is that on one side of the bazaar you can have very different appetites, opinions, and capital flowing from the other sides, but this variety never constrains its totality or its concept of unity. Instead, [this variety] acts as a point of strength. (Mousavi interview, 11 February 2010 interview, cited in Esfahlani, 2015, p.157)

The variety that coalesces into a unity in this image obviously parallels Shahrokni's notion of fluid publics coalescing into a unified counter-public. It could even be said to tie in with Papacharissi's argument (2010) that the in-between connective space of political mobilisation is enabled by individuals acting from their private spheres. In these optimistic visions of individual smallholders all contributing to and choosing from the democratic menu, Western liberal modernisation discourse and the notions of Iranian reformists seem to converge. Affect, here, plays the positive role of providing social cement, or 'social empathy and affinity' (Dabashi, 2010; Rahimi, 2011, above).

Most of these examples are taken, I emphasise, from highpoints of civil society activism, both online and offline, in recent Iranian history; I am interested, however, in what happens outside these exceptional political moments. My argument is that, since 2009, various types of fluid, ephemeral, public discussion have appeared online, and this type of public has been neglected by those who focus on coherent social movements or campaigns. One reaction to the apparent dearth of stable, coherent,

domestic ‘counterpublics’ (Fraser, 1990; Michaelsen, 2015) is to look to the diaspora. ‘My Stealthy Freedom’, the online campaign against the compulsory hijab, stimulated the formation of a large counter-public around its website, but the diasporic location of its founder, and her sometimes incautious political choices (for example, appearing at an event alongside Laura Bush), has not aided its appeal (see Seddighi and Tafakori, 2016).

I thus question whether the posited alternative of transnational interconnection is often too readily associated by commentators with a redemptive cosmopolis. Samira Rajabi, in her otherwise excellent contribution to *Social Media in Iran* (ed. Faris and Rahimi, 2015), after describing how the image of Neda, mediated as a martyr of the 2009 protests, circulated around the world, concludes that ‘[t]he power of images lies in this resurrection, not of the dead person but of her memory, which returns with the universal claim to human rights in public acts of performed cosmopolitanism.’ (Assmann and Assmann, 2010, cited in Rajabi, 2015, p.242). Invoking, once again, an Enlightenment teleology of modernity – progress towards universal human rights – does not assist in grounding one’s analysis in the specifics of the political situation. There is no mention here of how Neda’s memory and image has fared in the wake of the defeat of the 2009 movement. Gholam Khiabany and Annabelle Szeberny (2014) also, albeit tentatively, connect the possibility of political challenges to the Iranian government ‘with a new cosmopolitan ethos’. They align themselves here with Hamid Dabashi (2012) in the desire for a political alternative that does not relapse into nativism or West-centrism, but ‘transcends the redundant East/West binary’ (Khiabany and Szeberny 2014, p.488). They thus point hopefully to ‘a growing cacophony of civil society voices’ who suffer

from both ‘imperialism and dictatorship’, yet manage to defy both internal and external enemies (Khiabany, 2014, p.476).

This study examines, in some of its aspects, a rather different political landscape from these earlier accounts. The new Iranian government that emerged in 2013, with the election of Rouhani, certainly derived a certain legitimacy from the Green movement of 2009, as I discuss in Chapter Four below, but also from the hope that it would serve the interests of the nation, against that of the West, by putting an end to sanctions; it thus attracted support from conservatives too. The constellation created was hardly that of a new anti-imperialist left, or indeed an avowedly pro-Western liberal centre, as wished for by commentators outside the country. What I have found in social media comments on my selected sites are developments which confound binaries of repression-resistance, forms of political contestation which bear the marks of affective regimes, which are phrased not in terms of cosmopolitanism, but in terms of a new affective nationalism, which, it is hoped, will generate a necessary solidarity against the isolation of Iran through sanctions, seen frequently as a form of affective racialisation for which the rest of the world is deemed, in some sense, responsible.

In this regard, Fuchs (2014) warns of a tendency in studies of politics and social media to overestimate, even fetishise the transnational dimension of political struggle, which may become a substitute for nationally-based contestations and their proper analysis. Gerbaudo (2012) at least attends carefully to the necessary national dimension in each of his case studies – indeed it is central to his argument that the most advanced social movements of 2011 strove, in their majoritarian rhetoric, to create a new version of the national-popular. More pessimistically, Niki Akhavan cites Benedict Anderson on the

uses of new telecommunication technologies for the purpose of intensifying absolutist nationalist sentiments (Anderson 1998). Ethnographers have confirmed Anderson's insight, drawing attention to the ways that the transnational medium of the Internet has been used to strengthen - rather than to challenge - nationalism and other exclusionary ideologies (Akhavan 2013, p.3).

So before turning to the question of our own framework of analysis, we should summarise what the foregoing account tells us about the dominant approaches to the study of social media, politics and affect in recent years. On the one hand, there is the approach which sees the internet as a facilitator of personal autonomy; only from private, autonomic spaces, interacting horizontally, can a freely operating collective arise. It is widely acknowledged that affective motivations and ties are necessary in order to create such online collectivities, although scholars may opt for an Enlightenment-influenced conceptualisation of affect as driving rational deliberation, or a Deleuzian-Massumian approach which focuses on building intensities to disrupt the order of discourse. In an Iranian context, horizontalist approaches have yielded concepts such as 'fluid' or 'transient' publics and Facebook as containing the unity-in-diversity of the bazaar. More pessimistic approaches to social media, usually derived from Frankfurt school theorists such as Adorno and Habermas, but also Bourdieu, have stressed the internet's verticalism, its openness to manipulation by powerful corporate or state interests, the ways in which a new political habitus is being created (Fuchs, 2014; Dahlgren, 2014). In this account, affect operates as social cement, an instrument by which domination of minds and bodies is assured.

Yet the Facebook pages I have chosen to study tend to show that if the focus entirely on horizontalism - in this context, on social movements post-2009 - is misplaced – so is the emphasis on hidden verticality. It is the verticality of the relationships to the pages – which was quite obvious (not hidden), combined with the apparent horizontality of the relations between commentators, that generates a contested space, a sense there is something to push back against or appeal to. These spaces are/were both the space where disciplinary regimes of affect operated and the spaces where they were contested or modified/negotiated.

It is here that I return to Berlant's notion of intimate publics, as potentially indicating the kind of conceptual flexibility that is needed. In *Cruel Optimism*, she recalls, very pertinently, that

Public spheres are always affect worlds, worlds to which people are bound, when they are, by affective projections of a constantly negotiated common interestedness.

She then goes on to elaborate on the specific character of an intimate public:

But an intimate public is more specific. In an intimate public one senses that matters of survival are at stake and that collective mediation through narration... might provide some routes out of the impasse and the struggle of the present, or at least some sense that there would be recognition were the participants in the room together.(Berlant, 2011, p.226).

It is the question of survivability, framed through narratives of the sanctions crisis, that, as I argue, attaches people intimately to the figure of Javad Zarif, and that gives them both the sense of an opening, the possibility of a resolution to the situation, and the sense of recognition that has hitherto been lacking. What is recognised is suffering and vulnerability, which then become the defining attributes of this public, both on the Zarif page, and on other social media platforms, such as those of BBC Farsi, where there is no close, intimate relation to a proximate figure. The specific focus of this project is the forms of public affiliation on social media that are defined through and by vulnerability, where a felt sense of differentiation between some bodies and others permits the formation of new categories of self and other, ‘us’ and ‘them’. What the concept of an intimate public allows, then, is the conceptualisation of a space that is at once traversed by attachments to ‘normative structures’ (Faris and Rahimi, 2015) of politics, and simultaneously by a sense of political contestation and differentiation which includes, perhaps, a sense of the fragility of these very attachments.

Conclusion

What has been lacking, I suggest, in accounts of Iranian social media, is a sustained and explicit focus on affect and emotion and their role in political articulations. Such a focus would allow closer attention to the forms of the political when there is a dearth of wider citizen-led social mobilisations, and where affects are not necessarily in the service of coherent political narratives generated by relatively stable counterpublics. My argument thus differentiates itself both from the cyber-optimism often associated with Eurocentric paradigms of modernisation, which conceives of affect as flowing through decentralised networks, and from the cyber-pessimism of Fuchs (2014), for

whom Habermasian rational deliberation is the standard. Focusing on sites associated with powerful state media or politicians allows one a certain distance from the frequently fetishised horizontalism of social networks. It allows one to see the contestation of power by ordinary citizens but also the asymmetry of it, given their relative lack of organisational and epistemic resources. That is not to say that there is no possibility of public debate over matters of common concern – it is to point out the simultaneously affective and disorganised nature of these publics, which does not at all disqualify them from being political.

Chapter Three: Methodological Considerations

Introduction

This dissertation concerns the imbrication of the national imaginary in the transnational, which has led me to examine the relationship between elite global and local media platforms and the views and feelings of ordinary citizens. Accordingly, in this chapter I seek to first elaborate on the main issues for analysis and the methods of analysis I have used, and to explain the ways that they have been instrumental in understanding Facebook as a primary site of and the textual field for this research. This meant, in my view, selecting three particular Facebook pages that were widely read in Iran during the sanctions negotiations. I focus on comments on stories in two mainstream news pages, and also on the web page of Javad Zarif, in order to trace how the national imaginary is constructed by citizens in relation to the website, the nature of the news story, and the stage of the negotiations.

In this chapter, I summarise the way I understand the relation between affect and method, that is, how affect becomes an object of analysis through its imbrication with discourse in social, communicative interaction. The first section focuses on how the data was harvested and the reasons for using ‘found’ data rather than ‘made’ data. In the second section, I set out the reasons for using forms of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2003; Wodak et al., 1999) to interpret the data, and why this model has to be somewhat amended in the light of the scholarship on affect and the affective values that attach to linguistic-textual signs. Within this modified CDA framework, attention is given to indications of genre, that is, patterns of signification and social

interaction that relate to generic structures of expectation shaping what kinds of texts and meanings are produced. My approach to discourse analysis thus incorporates an emphasis on the place of genre in discourse analysis, in the light of recent work by Lomborg and others. These scholars conceptualise social media themselves as genre(s), shaped by a combination of technological affordance and historically developing social practices (Lomborg 2011, 2012, 2014). I seek to build on these sociological and media studies approaches to genre, firstly, by drawing on Judith Butler's insights on categorisations of grievability and affective regimes of classification, and secondly, referring to Lauren Berlant's work on the genres of mass culture, examining how they refract, palliate, or are disrupted by crisis (Berlant 2008a, 2011).

Online Ethnography : the study of 'Found Data'

Collecting online data via Facebook for social research is not an easy task, as the literature on methodology is of recent origin and is mostly confined to the analysis of the early modes of interactive online communication, which I will later briefly touch on. In studying and collecting social media data, Jensen distinguishes between *found* and *made* data as the two central modes of categorizing our objects of analysis; this is to delineate differences between data that are produced and archived in digital media regardless of the researcher's interest, for example, blog or debate forum archives, bit trails, etc., and data that is created in interaction between a researcher and a topic of interest, for example, ethnographic field notes or interview data (Jensen, 2011, 2012; Lomborg, 2011, 2012, 2014; see also Webb et al., 2000). In this vein, I look at *found data* in the form of comments generated by Iranians writing in Farsi on the Facebook pages listed above.

In terms of data collection, web archiving is one of the methodological tools for harvesting and analysing online data, which enables researchers to trace and examine how various actors interact through their chosen online medium. The data generated by web archiving is indeed ‘found’ data in the first instance. Nevertheless, web archives become ‘made’ since they need intervention and implementation of various methodological approaches to make sense of the data (Lomborg, 2012, pp.220-1). Web archiving can be implemented either electronically by using various technological tools, applications and data programming or with less involvement of technology and a more manual mode. I will be looking at both texts generated in Facebook and also the relevant replies they receive from other users.

One of the problematics of archiving websites in general, and social media in particular, is the question of how to adequately capture ‘a highly fluctuating and networked communicative environment’ (Lomborg, 2012, p.222). I chose manual screen capture as the main technique for gathering my data. This laborious method is nonetheless well suited to the archiving of a small number of sites on which the analysis performed will, as in this case, be largely qualitative, involving textual analysis. ‘Screen capture is very useful when one wishes to study style and design, carry out rhetorical or textual analysis, or in general carry out studies where access to the html code is not important.’(Brügger, 2011, p.27)

The method of manual screen capture is a rather challenging tool to use for analysis of social media as the content constantly changes or becomes updated. Here, I found it helpful to extend the fieldwork period and come back to the same page of which I had

taken a snapshot, and take further snapshots of the entire page making sure I capture the new updates on the page. I visited the selected pages several times, leaving three or four months between each visit, to make sure the number of likes, shares and comments looked similar to my latest snapshots. It is difficult to maintain a high frequency of manual snapshots: it requires a tremendous amount of time to carefully transfer all the interactions, both visual (not only possible video links or pictures but also ‘emojis’ and Gifs) and linguistic, into my archive of harvested data. Furthermore, the taking of snapshots cannot capture the layered development of discussions and narratives as comments get shared, commented on and ‘liked’.

In this sense, newer social media contrasts with blogs where the archive is organised chronologically and finding older data is a rather less complicated task. The problem with Facebook is that it does not have a straightforward hashtag tool or a chronological archival history where one can easily find published data on the chosen platform.

Instead, I had to manually scroll down and look through all the posts in order to concentrate on those published in my chosen periods. This nevertheless became easier, as during my later revisits to Facebook, looking for the latest updates of the snapshots I had taken a few months before, I only needed to use key words, as Facebook has enabled a search box in the ‘Posts’ section which allows one to look for specific titles or words. The search box, however, does not recognise the year in which posts or words have been published, so it was often something of a messy job to find the ‘right’ post. I also noticed that usually within four months of the original post being published, there were almost no updates in terms of shares or likes. Thus, most of the changes I noticed in my updates of snapshots of Facebook were between the original and the second snapshots. I sometimes observed, attached to comments, the names of friends, friends

of friends, people I had met at a party, or journalists. This rarely happened ten years earlier when surfing social media.

Brügger (2011, pp.28-29) distinguishes between three modes of harvesting data online, the first being the 'snapshot' strategy that typically captures data from many websites, based for example on a national domain. The term 'snapshot' is misleading, since it can take months to build up an archive of any usefulness. Even then, methods of quality control are normally insufficiently available. It is unsuited, as Brügger (2011) points out, to in-depth, qualitative analysis and to websites that are quickly updated.

Secondly, selective archiving is organised around a small number of preselected websites which are continually archived to create constant updates of selected social media in order to generate a nuanced and deep archive. As Brügger notes (2011, p.29), 'this strategy has a more continuous form' and is well suited to qualitative research. Lomborg notes that it is not yet a prominent research method, although she uses it in order to undertake a 'qualitative study of communicative practices as ongoing negotiations of meaning on blogs and Twitter' over a determined time period (Lomborg, 2012, p.222). It certainly appeared necessary to incorporate such an in-depth and qualitative strategy into my research method.

The third strategy is the 'event strategy' which archives specific websites or a group of sites in their relation to 'a given event' (for example, general elections), thereby generating a thematically coherent archive. It seeks to combine elements of the first and second methods, combining a larger number of websites with in-depth analysis of form

and content. For Brügger (2011) the ‘event strategy’ is the main methodological mode of approaching online data in social media research.

I found that a combination of the second method, ‘selective archiving’, and the third, the ‘event strategy’, was the most appropriate method for the purpose of my research. In selective archiving, which involves in-depth investigation of material on chosen websites, the process of selecting not only the websites themselves, but the data contained within each one, is heavily dependent on the research questions being asked, otherwise there would be no clear thematic focus, whereas the inductive component of the research would, at least initially, be more pronounced in the cases of the ‘snapshot’ and ‘event’ strategies. In the case of this project, however, a combination of ‘selective archiving’ and ‘event strategy’ was deemed appropriate, since the research questions have been generated around online responses to sanctions as event, albeit one of long duration. Given, then, that a key purpose of the ‘event strategy’ is to maximise concentration on a specific period of time, I focus on coverage of and responses to three specific periods on my chosen websites, all within the longer period of the 2013-15 sanctions negotiations.

Interpreting a dynamic, interactive and multi-level media environment

Any utterance is dialogic, oriented towards a response, according to Bakhtin (1986, cited in Lomborg, 2014, p.46).¹⁷ In the case of social media comment threads, the dialogic interactivity may be intense. The original news story quickly becomes a

¹⁷ Many linguists and scholars of language broadly define an utterance as language in use; thus an utterance could be ‘a written text of any length’ rather than having to be spoken (Polyzou, 2008, p.112, who also cites Bakhtin, 1986, in support of this contention). I discuss this in more detail in the section on discourse analysis below.

polysemic text which is mediated and interpreted differently by a large number of commentators in a short period of time, such that the content of the debate and the affective atmosphere at certain points may appear to have little connection to the ‘triggering’ story. This polysemic polyphony is far from constituting some ‘ideal speech situation’ (Habermas, 1991): in the chapters below I discuss the ways in which affective utterances on Facebook are played upon, limited and shaped by disciplinary regimes of governmentality. Moreover, as Sara Ahmed (2004a/2014) has pointed out, specific histories weigh upon each affective speech act (Chapter One above). Thus, as our observations of Farsi social media show, while each speech act is intensely responsive, there is pressure towards repetition, partial repetition, and cumulative exaggeration or exacerbation of particular sentiments, opinions, stances, as well as an expectation, at some point, of comments which differentiate themselves from the prevailing mood or tone.

Thus there are complex, ever-shifting combinations of fragmentation and continuity, coherence and incoherence, uniformity and differentiation. In relation to affect, this study attends, *inter alia*, to the repetitive techniques through which certain affective patterns are highlighted. This raises the question of what motivates users to follow certain affective patterns and not others, how some feelings get repeated and picked up on, while others, even though engaged in apparently similar affective patterns, get less attention. The study attends to what modes of affect ‘become’, which ‘moods’ last longer, for example, by the means of more replies to a given comment, or shares or ‘likes’. One question here to respond to was to what extent the more lasting or attractive affective-discursive patterns actually shaped the predominant received meaning of a given news story post, so that the ‘general affective mood’ associated with the post

became that which gave it sense. Those affective meanings became ‘attached’ and relevant in a process of what I call ‘affective pertinence’, which can be seen as connected with affective contagion’ or ‘transfer’, in a Deleuzian sense (Massumi, 2002), or with the circulation of objects of attachment, these attachments being affective-discursive sign values (Ahmed 2004a/2014).

This study, then, identifies certain repetitions and patterns of feelings on Farsi Facebook, in order to trace the ways in which they contribute to and constitute the ‘national imaginary’ of the ‘extended present’ (Berlant, 2011) associated with the period of sanctions. If one understands the ‘national imaginary’ as made up of continually shifting narratives, then Farsi social media texts may be understood as these narratives surfacing in fragmentary form: a part of a story, a famous saying, a particular phrase taken from a popular story or ‘national memory’, other forms of affective-textual production and circulated sentiment: insults, swearing and cursing, which I noticed are used for emotionally provoking respondents or other participants in the discussion. Insults, often framed within familiar heteronormative frameworks such as the making of gender-sensitive jokes, are sarcastic most of the time. I have found sarcasm to be one of the most repeated methods of either implying one’s anger and dissatisfaction about a piece of news on the sanctions negotiations process (given that I followed the three periods of intensive talks between Iran and the West between 2013 and 2015). I notice the sarcasm is often used as if the mere exposure of one’s anger is not sufficient to ‘mediate’ the pessimism, which does not necessarily relate to sanctions but goes ‘way back’ and connects itself to a historical memory of a national loss. As I will show later, this is more complex and specific than mere generalized nostalgia or melancholia around the loss of the ‘Persian Empire’. The sarcasm allows one to mediate one’s anger

or dissatisfaction as that which is not just discovered but is there as a historical memory of ‘us’, a deeply racialised one, it seems, particularly when people seek to communicate their frustration on either the BBC Farsi pages or Zarif’s page by observing that ‘they’ don’t see ‘us’ as human.¹⁸

One of the reasons I found it very helpful to work on more than one Facebook page, over a long period of using ‘lurking’ as a method of participant observation, was that it made it possible to trace the differences between the affective language used in the comments on Javad Zarif’s page, compared with Mehdi Parpanchi’s BBC Farsi/Persian page. My selection of these pages for my data analysis (see the final section of this chapter) was strongly shaped by the discovery of these revealing differences. The stories of misery and failure in individual lives which I found both upsetting, yet frequent, on Javad Zarif’s page did not appear much on Parpanchi’s BBC Persian page. Instead he attracted comments which employed a highly affective language of anger and hatred (mixed with despair) constantly pointing out ways in which ‘the West’ has damaged ‘us’. The melodramas, melancholia and sheer depression, with open and extensive descriptions of individual crises, suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts, men’s despair and feelings of shame in front of wives and families on Javad Zarif’s Facebook page, appeared to depict in detail the nation’s vulnerabilities, which were now willingly being shared with its ‘beloved’ foreign minister, the one who has arrived to save ‘us’. On Parpanchi’s page, in contrast, this vulnerability seemed to change its orientation and mode of expression. Even though still projecting despair and depression, the comments on Parpanchi’s BBC Persian page were characterised by cursing and

¹⁸ For example: ‘We want to be looked at as human, not as savages.’ (Comment on BBC Farsi, 24 November 2014, in reply to news item ‘Negotiations end without a deal’, discussed in Chapter Six below).

melancholia over a loss of ‘a powerful nation’, with users expressing the need to stop the poverty and hunger caused by the West. Parpanchi himself was frequently called a ‘traitor’, or treated as a symbol of imperialism, the ‘one’ who is imposing the sanctions on us, the one who has brought shame on us, etc. Differentiations between the nation and its enemies became much stronger and more numerous on this page, but still commentators usually ended up reproducing the same boundaries and distinctions as those on Javad Zarif’s page, categorisations which will be discussed in detail in the data analysis chapters below: that vulnerability is the new national imaginary of ‘our’ country and that those responsible for this vulnerability (through the sanctions regime, attacking human rights or refusing to give up the nuclear programme) are ‘them’ - be ‘they’ the Islamic Republic, associated with ‘*Delvapassan*’, a wing of the conservatives (see below), or the United States/the West. These pages, then, frame specific mediated interactions between their users, and political and media institutions, at simultaneously national and transnational, global and local levels.

Media genres

This study, then, treats the material affordances of social media, specifically Facebook, as key to the understanding of meaning-making and affective practices which are manifested in the online comments that are the objects of analysis. To assist in developing a more integrated approach in this respect, I will draw on converging insights from different disciplines and methods in order to explore and expand the concept of *genre*. In literary criticism and cultural studies, genre refers to sets of conventions and expectations that situate and structure the making and reading of a cultural text, which could be a work of art, a newspaper article, a film, a diary or journal, or for that matter a social media comment. This approach, while valuable, needs to be reconsidered in the light of approaches associated with media studies and with sociology.

Stine Lomborg's work looks at social media as genre within a media studies framework. She argues that social media platforms are sites of communicative practices - they are not 'different technologies' but considered a subgroup of digital media. Thus, her conceptualisation of social media as genre includes the technological, but above all she points to the intertwinement of the technological with the social, the 'interplay between interactive functionalities configured in the software and the distinctly social purposes that users orient to in their communicative practices' (Lomborg, 2011, p.57). Genre conventions also shape the ways in the technology itself develops, in a dialectical process. If Facebook, for example, is a media genre, the software itself is continuously shaped (within the limits allowed by the company) by human collective agency.

Lomborg emphasises that such a process may be extremely rapid in regard to social media:

In contrast [to mass media forms], social media genres may be anticipated to exhibit more dynamic and unstable genre patterns because a larger and more diverse number of producers and audiences are in direct dialogue, making feedback much more instantaneous, especially in synchronous short-form genres such as online chat and microblogging. (Lomborg, 2014, pp.28-29)

Furthermore:

Emergent texts mix genres at a high pace, genres intersect when user interactions unfold across genres, and new genres continuously emerge from combinations of existing genres. (Lomborg, 2011, p.69)

Associated with Facebook and with other social media platforms are particular styles or sub-genres of informality – whether friendly, intimate, empathetic, hostile or abusive- often associated with repetitive yet varying choral refrains.¹⁹

Generic frameworks can be identified through the use of repetition- particularly noticeable in social media comments, involving particular images or national/cultural reference points, tropes and what may be called ‘affective repertoires’.

This study, however, does not look at the practices of meaning generated by, for example, friends’ groups on Facebook. It looks at mixed-genre platforms, combining

¹⁹ Rahimi, in a similar vein, associates certain styles - in essence, affective-discursive modes - with blogs as an early social media genre: ‘[b]logs presented not only the most accessible, immediate, and personalized forum of contestation... but also served as an “emergent genre” as a new cultural practice of dissident politics...’ (2011, p.165)

remediated news stories in a genre developed during the 20th century (BBC Farsi and Radio Farda pages) or the genre of quasi-official, quasi-personal pronouncements (Zarif's page) with the genres and styles of utterance followed and developed by Facebook users as they interact with these institutional websites. This investigation therefore needs to clarify, at each point, how far the genre(s) within which a particular institutional text is published shapes the genre of response – and vice versa, to the extent that this is possible.

Lomborg frames social media as communicative tools that allow ordinary people to make sense of their everyday lives. She thus focuses on the relations between texts and media users within specific contexts. Such relationality between texts and users is understood as a process of sense-making, which converges well with the emphasis that Wetherell (2012) places on meaning-making as affective-discursive practice. In this sense-making process, Lomborg argues, 'the content and textual traits of the media text activate the receiver's cognitive, affective, bodily, and social capacities'. Crucially, this includes 'the activation of relevant genre knowledge' (Lomborg, 2014, p.2). The concept of genre, then, she argues, allows one to shift the emphasis from media technology to the ways in which communicative platforms are utilised in the construction of 'the social fabric of everyday life' (Lomborg, 2011, p.58). Social media within this framework facilitate particular modes of 'being social', and 'of everyday togetherness' and permit 'relationship maintenance among participants' (Lomborg, 2014, p.15). As Lomborg explains, therefore, genre is 'done' or enacted in social practice:

If genre is enacted through social interaction, this implies that genre can be studied and analysed within an interactionist framework focusing on how users ‘do’ genre – that is, on how users accomplish meaningful communication by bringing interactional norms, conventions and tacit genre knowledge into play in the communicative process, and on how they demonstrate genre skills. (Lomborg, 2011, p.68)

If genre is something that is ‘done’, then it can be linked to performance, indeed, to categories of performative speech acts (Butler, 1997b; Ahmed 2004), as discussed in Chapter Two above. To develop an adequate interpretive framework for understanding how genres are performed or cited in communicative events, it is necessary to draw on some of the insights of discourse analysis, but also to suggest how its prevailing focus could be modified.

Discourse analysis and the affective

In this section, I endeavour to set out a framework for a form of discourse analysis that can adequately deal with affect in relation to meaning making practices, and in the context of social media. Given that our data is largely made up of textual material, the relationship we conceptualise between language and affect becomes methodologically crucial. In Chapter One, we identified two main strands in affect theory, one arguing that affect is ontologically distinct from language, the other taking the position that affect and discourse are inseparable, or at least not readily distinguishable. Emotions are viewed as linguistic and discursive domestications of affect by the first group, while

for the second group, emotions are not essentially different from affect, since language and cognition will be involved at all levels. Knudsen and Stage (2015) suggest that these distinctions have a methodological relevance:

For supporters of the first group of researchers' methods, affect is beyond language categorization, and therefore, any analytical strategy must focus on semantics and semiotics as distorted traces of affect, not a medium for it. For the second group, language would be considered capable of expressing affects, as there would be no inherent contradiction between the categories of language and the categories taking part in the social shaping of bodies (Knudsen and Stage, 2015, p.2).

Yet, when it comes to specific case studies, as Knudsen and Stage further argue, the difference may not be so clear, since both groups tend to agree that 'affects travel between (human and non-human) bodies and are experienced subjectively, and that they are often perceived as surprising or somehow beyond the will and conscious intentionality of the affected body' (Knudsen and Stage, 2015, p.3).

In order to clarify the methods for analyzing our data, we need to ask what sort of data it is. On the one hand, it is largely text - mainly Facebook comments on news stories - though a few images are selectively discussed. Yet these traces and residues of process are also text, and thus objects of textual analysis. Theoretical approaches discussed in Chapter One above seem to favour such a text-based procedure. I see Sara Ahmed's work (2004) as important for the analysis of linguistic signs as communicating affective values and attachments in particular social contexts, including affects that cement forms

of inclusion and exclusion, 'us' and 'them'. On the other hand, these social media texts are records of social interactions - indeed, they are not only records, but the principal material of social communication in these particular contexts. These comments, then, are (now frozen or dead) archival residues of previously 'live' social interactions. Wetherell's concept of affective-discursive practice is useful, then, in allowing us to try to reconstruct some of the changing affective repertoires and intensities of these social interactions, the ways in which people, through these comments, negotiate levels of feeling and discursive convention as part of being 'caught up' in a social process (Blackman, 2007/2008, quoted in Wetherell, 2012, p.141). Indeed, as evidence of language in use, these texts may be regarded as 'utterances' in the Bakhtinian sense (Polyzou, 2008, p.112, citing Bakhtin, 1986). Every utterance, in these terms, is dialogic, that is, oriented towards a response, as can be readily observed when reading Facebook comments. The data analysis draws on the work of scholars who work on particular forms of utterance, that is, speech acts, that performatively and repetitively cite, constitute, but also challenge identity and belonging (Butler, 1997b, Ahmed, 2004). The affordances of social media facilitate such repetitive citations (Ferreday, 2011) but also create spaces of contestation (Kuntsman, 2011, 2012), as we discussed in Chapters One and Two above.

The analytical method I use, then, can be said to involve discourse analysis, both in the sense that it attends to uses of language, and because it traces patterns of discourse in the wider sense of sets of social ideas and practices. This method, however, is centrally focused on seeking out patterns of emotion and broader affective intensities, as they are manifested in my records of particular affective-discursive social practices - the

research archive of Facebook comments. The method, if it requires a name, could be called ‘discursive affect analysis’ – the discursive analysis of affect.

It is necessary to reflect on what this method may draw from critical discourse analysis (CDA), as an influential model, or rather, set of associated models. CDA, as its key proponents describe it, does not focus on the study of language in abstraction from the social and cultural world. Its units of analysis are texts considered in relation to discourses and modes of speech, rather than isolated sentences and words (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p.2). CDA analyses the legitimisation and contestation of injustice and inequality through language, as it reflects, refracts and shapes power relations between classes, men and women, and national, ethnic, cultural, religious or sexual groups (Titscher et al., 2000, p.164). Across its differing perspectives, CDA focuses on the role played by language in the construction and maintenance of social groups, which therefore means its role in reinforcing, negotiating or challenging structures of power (see also Fairclough, 1995, 2003, 2009). In its attention to the relation between language and social practice, therefore, CDA may be seen as applicable to Facebook comments as the textual manifestations and residues of affective-discursive practices. As Wetherell (2012) has already suggested, it would assist the analysis of social interactions to be able to add the word ‘affective’ to the term ‘discursive practice’. Fairclough’s case studies, however (for example, 2003, 2009), do not usually lend themselves to the foregrounding of affectivity or emotionality as a part of the meaning-making that is being analysed. Rather, his work interprets discursive practices as involving habitual ideas, which are linked to social interest groups and/or the power of institutions. Furthermore, Fairclough does not usually directly or explicitly connect affect with his investigations into the connections between discourse and social power. In terms of the

study of the intensity of affects and their role in creating attachment and distinctions, perhaps the most relevant approach for our purposes may be that pioneered by Ruth Wodak and other University of Vienna scholars. In well-known case studies (Wodak et al., 1999; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001), they identify nationalistic and racialised boundary-making between Self and Other – a key element of our analysis - in syntactical and lexical patterns and structures. In this approach, key attention is given to the following questions:

How are persons named and referred to linguistically? (strategies).

- What traits, characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to them?

(predicational strategies).

- By means of what arguments and argumentation schemes do specific persons or social groups try to justify and legitimate the exclusion, discrimination, suppression and exploitation of others? (argumentation strategies, including fallacies).

- From what perspective or point of view are these namings, attributions and arguments expressed? (perspectivation and framing strategies).

- Are the respective discriminating utterances articulated overtly, are they even intensified or are they mitigated? (mitigation and intensification strategies).

(Reisigl and Wodak, 2001, p.xiii)

Although Wodak and her collaborators have not tended to focus explicitly on affect, it is clear that all of the five strategies listed carry strong affective potentials. A key point to note, however, is that this form of CDA has focused on the utterances of white Europeans who are interpreted as occupying positions of power and privilege in relation

to the racialised others who are the objects of their strategies (Wodak et al., 1999; Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). As I explore in Chapter Six, where I analyse self-other distinctions made by Iranians in a transnational framework, the ‘others’ in question are frequently local and/or US/Western governments, so it would be better to refer to differentiating rather than discriminating strategies, although this does not exclude the possibility - or dismiss the actuality – of chauvinist or racist language being used (see also KhosraviNik and Zia, 2014).

In sum, the more useful elements of CDA for our purposes involve a focus on reading for both dominant discourses and forms of contestation of these discourses in the analysis of specific units of text and speech. Both kinds of discourse may involve ‘us’/‘them’ distinctions, in respect of which an ‘affective reading’ could discern a highly affective element. Nevertheless, the focus of this research on the discursive analysis of affect and emotion seems to require a more explicit attention not only to the types of language, but to the structures of social interaction through which emotions are organized on an everyday basis. This is why the final sections in this chapter consider the question of genre, and evaluate the approaches, first, of critical discourse analysts, and then of feminist scholars.

Genre in affective-discursive practice

In this section, we re-connect the analysis of affective-discursive practice to the discussion of genre in a way that allows us to attend more closely to genres of textual production and interaction on social media. In critical discourse analysis (CDA), genre may be seen as fundamental to the organisation of social interaction. Genre is defined by Fairclough as ‘a socially ratified way of using language in connection with a particular type of social activity’ (Fairclough, 1995, p.14). Elsewhere, he writes that ‘discourse as part of social activity constitutes genres. Genres are diverse ways of acting, of producing social life, in the semiotic mode’ (Fairclough, 2001, p.235). There are, for example, verbal and textual genres governing the interactions of social superiors and inferiors, or social equals, in various situations connected with work, travel, politics, leisure and intimacy. Bazerman also emphasises their fundamental significance in social life:

Genres are not just forms. Genres are forms of life, ways of being. They are frames for social action. ... Genres shape the thoughts we form and the communications by which we interact. Genres are the familiar places we go to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the familiar. (Bazerman, 1997, cited in Swales, 2009, p.6)

CDA in Fairclough’s approach, for example, focuses on the linguistic analysis of the ‘communicative event’ – say, a Facebook comment - as ‘discursive practice’ which involves articulation of ‘discourses and genres’ (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.72). This involves considering ‘whether the discursive practice reproduces or, instead,

restructures the existing order of discourse and about what consequences this has for the broader social practice (the level of social practice)' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.72). As they put it, 'the order of discourse constitutes the resources (discourses and genres) that are available. It delimits what can be said. But, at the same time, language users can change the order of discourse by using discourses and genres in new ways or by importing discourses and genres from other orders of discourse' (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002, p.72). This approach, then, involves a level of dynamic interaction, in which language use is both structured and agentive, an approach which fits with our observations concerning Facebook comments. Furthermore, central to these discursive practices are the shifting uses of particular genres.

Other scholars have also emphasised, against tendencies towards rigid classification of social activity by genre, that the conventions of genre are subject to change and challenge as social groups struggle to keep or gain power. Genre boundaries may be experienced as loose or partial. Genres may be mixed. Stine Lomborg argues that a mere

focus on textual classification... misses the wider potential of genre analysis in explaining how genres are constituted, negotiated, stabilised and destabilised in the communicative process. As a top-down approach, classification involves analysing and making inferences on the premises of existing genres, thereby potentially failing to account for any distinctly new traits. (Lomborg, 2011, p.62)

Similarly, Frow has suggested that it helps to conceive genres as 'not fixed and pre-given forms by thinking about texts as performances of genre rather than reproductions

of a class to which texts belong, and by... stressing the importance of edges and margins - that is, stressing the open-endedness of generic frames' (Frow, 2006, p.3). This emphasis on texts as performances, then, converges with scholarly approaches outlined above – we can conceptualise textual performances as having a flexible and provisional relationship to the genres whose conventions they reference. Moreover, performative texts, as speech acts, that is, utterances that 'do' something, are intimately linked to the social practice of genre conventions. For van Leeuwen, indeed, 'the basic unit of generic structure is the speech act' (Van Leeuwen, 1993, cited in Polyzou, 2008, p.112). In respect of each speech act, its illocutionary character (what it directly does) as well as its perlocutionary character (its indirect consequences), is reshaped as generic frameworks of meaning change, shift and get renegotiated (see Austin 1962; Butler, 1997b). This approach can be used to interpret the dynamic and often dramatic shifts of affect and meaning, around both the news stories posted on our selected Facebook pages and the comments which have a putative relation to those news stories, that were highlighted above. We will return to these points when we examine Lauren Berlant's approach to genre below.

Drawing, in part, on CDA approaches to the categorisations of 'us' and 'them' and to the analysis of genre as discursive social practice, I attend in particular to what I see as genres of grievability and vulnerability that emerge online. I trace binary distinctions between Self and Other on social media as organised around what Judith Butler in *Frames of War* (2010) refers to as notions of grievability and non-grievability. I argue that Iranian commentators, for the most part, see themselves as non-grievable bodies, deprived of empathy under sanctions, either from their own or Western governments. If lives are not grievable, as Butler argues (2010, 2016) they are judged to be unworthy of

protection, and hence remain precarious and vulnerable. This gives rise to particular affective genres of vulnerability in Facebook comments, such as the choral genre, or the more intimate epistolary genre – Facebook posts in the form of letters addressed to Javad Zarif – all of which emphasise and perform vulnerability, as discussed in Chapter Five. Iranians’ utilisation of these genres, I contend, contributes not only to their self-understanding as political subjects, but to the imagining of national community (Anderson, 1991). I thus seek to explore genre - here, genres of vulnerability - as reflecting and shaping the *national imaginary*. As I mentioned in Chapter One above, Fairclough proposes that forms of social imaginary involve the generation of discourse around ‘what might or could or should be’ (Fairclough, 2003, p.207). ‘These imaginaries [he argues] may be enacted as actual (networks of) practices; imagined activities, subjects, social relations... can become real activities, subjects, social relations...’ This means that ‘[t]hey become enacted discursively as new genres’ (Fairclough, 2003, p.208). What needs to be added, in order to modify this observation, is that these genres, as they develop, in turn create shifts in the social imaginary. In our case studies, I propose, such shifts are associated with the generic narrativisation of sanctions as national crisis. Thus the final step in the explanation of the method considers crisis in relation to genre.

Genre and crisis: ‘situation’ and ‘event’

For the literary and cultural studies scholar Lauren Berlant ‘[g]enres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art.’ (Berlant, 2011, p.6) This is a more passive picture of genre than the ones previously discussed. But Berlant’s work, rather than framing people as agentive social actors who ‘do’ genre (Lomborg, 2011, p.68), is useful in its emphasis upon the way life, and its genres, appears to ‘happen to’ people, the way that history over-determines ordinary life. This recalls many an Iranian Facebook comment in the vein of ‘we are just watching the [sanctions] negotiations’.

I develop a reading of sanctions in terms of a Berlantian notion of crisis as involving not only the economic level, but the way life is lived and given affective valence. The global economic crisis of 2008, in Berlant’s view, stimulated a crisis of genres of the ‘good life’ in Western culture (2011). One result, then, is the widespread sensation or affect of ‘impasse’, which is a situation offering no resolution, where there are no clear narrative genres offering places of ‘recognition and reciprocity’ (Berlant, 2008a, p.xi, 2011, p.185). But, she argues, ‘[t]he waning of genre [in times of crisis] frames different kinds of potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates’ (Berlant, 2011, pp.6-7). Subjects navigate this unprecedented situation in simultaneously creative, exploratory and overdetermined ways. Indeed, this is how undefined ‘situations’ become defined as ‘events’: for Berlant, ‘[t]he becoming historical of the affective event and the improvisation of genre amid pervasive uncertainty’ are interlinked processes (2011, p.6). My argument is that the constitution of sanctions as Iranian national crisis indeed affords a ‘potential opening’, which allows

the creation of *the compassionate state*; or, more precisely, this allows *vulnerable publics* to create this state as their ‘object of desire’ (Berlant, 2008a, 2011) through improvising new genres of vulnerability and grievability, within which they may narrate and bring into being this wished-for object. Through declaring sanctions as crisis, simultaneously their resolution is imagined; thus the situation, with its worrisome indefiniteness and its openings, is produced in the expectation that it be located, ultimately, as resolved event, that it will ‘find[...] its genre’ (Berlant, 2011, p.20).²⁰ This prospect, however, as I suggest later, is by no means so certain. Such optimistic re-attachments to the normative, to the existing order as source of hope, may hold out the cruel prospect, yet again, of disappointment.

Our attention to the ways in which subjects find forms of narrative genre on Facebook, through which to make sense of sanctions and the suffering they cause, to turn the situation into event, is thus inspired by Berlant’s nuanced approach to genre as the mediated form by which the subject experiences the historical. In one of her few comments on social media (on her blog), Berlant has noted her sense that ‘Facebook is about calibrating the difficulty of knowing the importance of the ordinary event’ (2007). But what the passage following shows is the cultural and historical distance between the perspective adopted in this admittedly exploratory blog post, and the phenomenon this project is trying to analyse. She writes:

²⁰ As Berlant explains ‘the activity of living within and beyond normative activity gets embedded in form, but [she is] less interested in the foreclosures of form and more in the ways the activity of being historical *finds* its genre, which is the same as finding its event.’ (Berlant, 2011, p.20) The choice of the word ‘find’ deliberately suggests an active search for a meaningful framing, not simply a passive acceptance of the forms and genres that already exist.

People are trying there to eventalize[sic] the mood, the inclination, the thing that just happened—the episodic nature of existence. So and so is in a mood right now. So and so likes this kind of thing right now; and just went here and there. This is how they felt about it. It's not in the idiom of the great encounter or the great passion, it's the lightness and play of the poke. There's always a potential but not a demand for more. (Berlant, 2007)

The stress here on lightness and informality is, or at least was, prior to the recession of 2008 and the global protests and revolts of 2011, not untypical of Western commentators on social media. But 'the idiom of the great encounter, the great passion', rather than 'lightness and play' is indeed what dominates the Farsi Facebook comments we analyse. If anything, the encounter, the feeling, may be overwhelming, as Berlant later discusses in *Cruel Optimism* (2011) – thus the difficulty in making sense of the event of sanctions, of finding the appropriate genre of response, is precisely the difficulty of combining the historical with the everyday and episodic.

Selecting the Data

I focused on Farsi social media responses to news coverage of three periods during the sanctions negotiations of 2013 to 2015. The first period is *June-November 2013*. In March 2013, under the same Obama administration that had put in place the most comprehensive sanctions ever on Iran in 2010, the US began secret talks with Iran on its nuclear programme, with the prospect of sanctions relief. In June 2013, the 'moderate' Hassan Rouhani was elected Iranian president, in place of the previous president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, considered a hardliner. In September that year, Obama

telephoned Rouhani, the first contact at presidential level between the two countries since 1979, and there was a first meeting between the US secretary of state, John Kerry, and Iranian foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif. In November 2013, Iran and the P5+1 (the UN Security Council members, plus Germany) came to an interim agreement, which limited Iran's nuclear programme and allowed the lifting of some sanctions.

The second period is *July-December 2014*, during a year in which hopes for a deal were frustrated. In July 2014, the deadline for a comprehensive agreement to be reached between Iran and the P5+1 was not met and was extended to November of the same year. This deadline was not complied with either, and was extended to the end of June 2015.

The third period covers *March-October 2015*. In March 2015, the two sides met in Lausanne, Switzerland, to finalise an agreement. On 2 April 2015, Iran and the world powers (P5+1) announced a framework deal whereby Iran would restrict its nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief, and a final deal would be struck in June; the two sides committed to finalising a comprehensive deal by the end of June. Federica Mogherini, EU foreign policy chief, called the deal a decisive step' and there were street celebrations in Iran. In June 2015, the two sides met again in Vienna, although they failed to reach a deal by the deadline of 30 June 2015. Amid doubt expressed on both sides as to whether a deal could be reached, negotiations continued for a further two weeks, with the deadline being extended a further four times. A deal was finally achieved in Vienna on 15 July 2015. In spite of considerable opposition in the US Senate and in Congress, the deal was formally ratified by both sides on October 18,

2015 (Lyons, 2015). It should be noted that news stories outside these periods that related to a given stage of the negotiations also formed part of my material.

In terms of sampling processes, I selected data from news networks that were already known to me through my preliminary observations. I selected Farsi Facebook pages using two sets of criteria: firstly, I selected news and political pages that were made public and attracted a considerable number of people (normally the numbers exceeded 1000 followers). Such pages included those journalists, social and human rights activists or authors. For example, the page of Mehdi Parpanchi, a journalist who works on the BBC Persian service has attracted thousands of followers and commentators who reflect on issues of Iran and Iranianness from both inside and outside the country. Secondly, I looked at the official Facebook pages of selected number of electronic journals, newspapers, news agencies, public online campaigns on various matters, and politicians.

I have therefore selected what can be classed as two kinds of source in Farsi for their popularity and high visibility. They were visited, shared and commented on constantly during the course of the 2013-15 negotiations. The chosen pages are: firstly, the official page of Javad Zarif, Iran's chief negotiator with the 'world powers', and the foreign minister of President Rouhani's administration, with 929,000 likes up to December 2015 (to date: 913,652), and with every post receiving around 1,000 to 4,000 replies; and the linked pages of BBC Persian, with 3,114,900 likes (to date: 4,338,780), and Mehdi Parpanchi, a much featured BBC Persian producer and journalist, with 215,000 likes as of December 2015 (to date 244,643). I treat these pages as interconnected parts of the BBC Farsi profile on Facebook. Mehdi Parpanchi has often

cross-shared BBC Persian news items on his personal Facebook page and these posts have generated far more responses than the official BBC Persian Facebook page. This is arguably due to Parpanchi's frequent TV appearances in his capacity as a major producer and broadcaster and because of the popularity of BBC Persian TV in Iran as one of the most watched foreign channels in Farsi. Since its inception on 14 January 2009, the BBC Persian Service has become the major point of reference and also platform of appearance for oppositional politics and culture in people's everyday lives and it has been frequently and more recently severely criticised and designated by the Iranian government as an enemy and a traitor in the 'soft war' of the West against the Islamic Republic, with a focus on what is commonly referred to in popular culture in Iran as 'regime change'. As a result, Iranian journalists working for the BBC have always had a rocky relationship with the Iranian government, with travel to Iran becoming almost impossible after the post-2009 election protests for fear of arrest and prosecution.

Among the Facebook pages I decided to omit from my study was that of the Voice of America Persian service, which also delivers television and radio output. Much of its audience switched to the BBC when it started cable broadcasting in early 2000s. Run mainly by elderly supporters of the exiled Shah, it is increasingly seen as 'old fashioned' and 'out of touch'. I have also omitted from consideration Radio Farda, which, with 1,560,240 million likes as of December 2015, is the official Farsi Facebook page of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, based in Washington DC and Prague, with internet, TV and radio output in 21 countries. I decided that there would simply be too much data to absorb and process if I chose another Western news station, and the BBC Farsi and Mehdi Parpanchi Facebook pages combined had significantly bigger

audiences. Moreover, some of the comments on the BBC pages were directed towards Parpanchi personally, yielding interesting material for analysis in a way not afforded by Radio Farda.

BBC Persian has remained the most widely read, listened to and watched platform, providing radio and TV channels, podcasts, and news websites for those interested in following the news on Iran beyond the non-cable Iranian national TV and radio channels, considered in the monopoly of the Iranian government (Sreberny, Khiabany, 2010). It should also be noted that Facebook users or those only lurking and following or 'liking' BBC pages are not exclusively *opponents* of the Iranian government, as is often assumed, nor, in the case of Javad Zarif, are they necessarily fans of the foreign minister.

I have thus selected 'impure' or 'mixed-genre'²¹ platforms, where citizens engage in an asymmetric way with the output of powerful transnational and local sites, rather than the so-called 'autonomous' or 'bottom up' pages of citizens and Facebook groups or Twitter hashtags, or social media platforms like Friendfeed and Googlereader (now closed down), which were used by Iranian citizens in the 2000s to a greater extent than in the West (Akhavan, 2013). This is appropriate, given the focus of this project on the interaction between the doings of the political elite in and via the mainstream media, and the articulations of ordinary lives.

²¹ I discuss the notion of mixed genres in the section on media genres above.

Conclusion

I have drawn on some of the insights generated by exponents of CDA, but the CDA approach, at the risk of over-generalising, has largely been focused on analysing discursive practices, whereas it is necessary to develop ways of attending more closely to affective-discursive practices. The method of discursive affect analysis that this study endeavours to apply involves reading for affect in a way that is sensitive to the accumulation and circulation of emotional/affective intensities, ‘transmission’ and ‘movement’, avoiding seeking an over-literal or one-to-one correspondence between signs and feelings, while bearing in mind that certain emotions, at least (hope, despair, fear, anger), are often named, discussed and performed as such, so that the overt content cannot be overlooked. In analyzing the affects around belonging, or categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’, inclusion/exclusion, there needs to be a focus on the ways in which attachments to and detachments from particular objects take place, to use the phraseology of Berlant (2008a, 2011), or on the ways in which emotional attributes stick to certain bodies and not others (Ahmed, 2004a).

Regarding genre, we have argued for a convergence between approaches for the study of social media such as Facebook. Social media genres are shaped and reshaped at the intersection of technological affordance and human agentic social practice. It is also clear that genre is central to the organisation of communication and social interaction more widely. In drawing on Butler (2004, 2010), we suggest that lives may be produced online in genres of grievability and precarity. The work of Berlant (2011) also indicates that the production of crisis – here, in the form of sanctions - may be understood as generating new genres of affective attachment through new forms of narrative. Finally, given that Berlant’s focus has been – and my focus is - a particular

national imaginary, Fairclough's observation (2003; see above) that genres can be discursive enactments of imaginaries is potentially a most productive insight for the purposes of this project.

Chapter Four:

Exceptional Precarity: National Crisis and the Emergence of the ‘Compassionate State’



Figure 1: Spontaneous gathering outside Tehran’s Mehrabad airport welcoming Javad Zarif, the foreign minister in Hassan Rouhani’s administration on 24 November 2013, upon his return from Geneva after the end of the first round of resumed talks with the P5+1 countries since the new Iranian administration was elected a few months earlier. The slogan in the picture reads: ‘this is the result of hope on 14 June 2013’ - referring to the presidential election and Rouhani’s invocation of ‘hope’. Photograph, Hemmat Khahi. (Asre-Iran, 2013).

Introduction

‘Nations provoke fantasy’ is the statement with which Lauren Berlant opens her book, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (1991, p.1). I asked myself, what were the fantasies which were provoked in the aftermath of Hassan Rouhani’s announcement of his candidature in the 2013 presidential election? The eleventh presidential election since the 1979 revolution was not an ordinary one, or if it was ordinary in its continuity and chronology, it nevertheless carried a sense of non-ordinariness, in that it was the first

general presidential election following the imposition of comprehensive US sanctions against Iran in 2010 (CISADA)²², signed by President Obama, the face of a ‘hopeful’ politics (Obama, 2007). This saw the escalation of the sanctions to their highest level, suggesting similarities to the disastrous sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s with their devastating effects on ordinary lives (Gordon, 2013; Moret, 2015; Introduction).²³ The 2013 election was also an exceptional, highly affective, political scene in another sense, for it followed the controversial 2009 protests against the result of the 10th presidential contest, which was widely believed to be fraudulent,²⁴ and which was also perceived as an interruption of the ordinary,²⁵ not only for its participants, for bystanders, but also for the governing regimes of power in place whose legitimacy were perceived as fragile at the time (Dabashi, 2010). At the time when many of the political analysts and/or oppositional groups, inside and outside Iran were having debates over whether the establishment and the political factions would be able again to mobilise people, one of the questions to ask was: in the wake of the trauma witnessed, memorised, and/or inscribed on bodies after the unfolding of the 2009 uprisings and the scale of

²² H.R.2194 - Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act of 2010, 111th Congress (June 2010). See also United States Congress (2010); White House (2010). US and Western affective discourses around sanctions are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six.

²³ In ‘Humanitarian impacts of economic sanctions on Iran and Syria’, Moret (2015) gives a thorough overview of what consequences ‘comprehensive sanctions’ have in practice, in connection with the loss of lives and unintended effects on ordinary lives. This has already been discussed in the Introduction, but the affective-discursive mediation of this suffering is the main topic of Chapters Four, Five and Six.

²⁴ After the result was announced, the morning after the election, declaring Ahmadinejad as the winner, there was, amidst the sense of a collective skepticism and distrust, a popular and strong belief that the election amounted to a coup and that it was organised and engineered against the collective will of the people [*Khast-e-mardom*]. The repeated claims that it was a coup further angered people and made them desperate, fuelling the protests following the election results. In subsequent years, the term ‘2009 coup’ [*Koudeta ye 88*] was used continuously, and carried the burden not only of anger but a larger accumulated emotional intensity, forming and constituting categories of ‘Us’ (the people) and ‘Them’ (the state).

²⁵ The 2009 election was followed by months of uprisings which initially emerged as quiet protests objecting to what was seen as the failure to count all the votes of the people who had voted for Mir Hossein Mousavi. As the protests spread, and the uncertainty started to receive more media attention, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the presumed leaders of what was called the Green Movement, were put under house arrest.

suppression, fear and, for many, the loss of hope, what could begin to heal the ‘national wound’²⁶ and bring back to life the nation’s injured body?²⁷

In this chapter, I explore the construction of what I call the emergence of *the compassionate state* in Iran, referring to the May 2013 election and the victory of Hassan Rouhani, as generative of new fantasies and vocabularies of national attachments; I seek to develop the term through the analysis of comments generated on Facebook where commentators reflect on ‘unjust and cruel sanctions’ (*Tahrimhaye Zalemaneh*).²⁸ In examining the emergence of the ‘compassionate state’ through the data analysis, I explore how Hassan Rouhani’s first administration is constructed and pictured as the *empathiser*, that is ‘empathising’ with the in-pain and worn-out bodies, tropes used widely in Facebook comments. It was in the acknowledgment of people’s suffering, I argue, that their precarity was constituted as not merely normal, as the previous administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad seemed to propose, but as *exceptional*. In stark contrast to Rouhani, Ahmadinejad, in an infamous speech which was repeated over and over in ordinary discussions and used on social media as a reminder of his non-recognition of people’s suffering, had labelled sanctions as only ‘a piece of torn paper’ [*kaghaz pareh*] (Dawson 2007).²⁹ I contend that the language

²⁶ Here, I use the term ‘national wound’ specifically to refer to the recurrent phrase used to embody what people went through and felt collectively during and after the outbreak of the 2009 protests and the subsequent arrests, imprisonments, harsh sentences and loss of life. The term has been widely used on social media platforms, namely Twitter and Facebook.

²⁷ Many op-ed, articles and commentaries appeared before the election reflecting on the costs of ‘boycotting the election’ for the nation: <http://www.roozonline.com/persian/news/newsitem/article/92-8.html>

²⁸ In the first official election video, Rouhani states that he has come ‘to end the cruelty and injustice of the pressures on the Iranian nation’ (Rouhani, 2013).

²⁹ It is also worthy of mention that *Kaghaz Pareh* is a very common expression whose meaning goes way beyond its literal translation, in that it specifically refers to uselessness and being completely ineffective. This at the time sparked anger on social media to the extent that it became a slogan and, on social media platforms, a hashtag whilst advocating for Rouhani’s candidacy, or simply reminding people of the sanctions years.

which was used to describe Rouhani's recognition of an exceptional precarity allowed sanctions to be produced as distinct, but also as delimitable crisis, in that it cast sanctions as a national crisis within the normative framework of established politics.

I thus examine how the compassionate state was positioned in relation to the *suffering nation*, which worked through the production of the narrative of sanctions as crisis. In this vein, I trace the development of what can be construed as new affective and emotional genres, generated within the *overarching genre* of the compassionate or empathetic state. These generic narrativisations framed and produced sanctions as an identifiable 'crisis' that was also constitutive of modes of national imaginary, which purported to incorporate the suffering that had previously been ignored.

The Emotional Politics of Crisis

From early on, Hassan Rouhani's campaign messages introduced a discourse of compassion, which had not only been dismissed, but actively rejected through the previous administration's denial that sanctions had had an impact (see below). This was, as far as the Iranian election was concerned, a temporal and spatial empathy, which foregrounded the 'sanctioned nation' as a priority not only to address, but also to 'heal', with its injuries felt as having been inflicted over the years of 'the stretched out present' as '*extended crisis*', 'with one happening piling on another' (Berlant, 2011, p.7), in forms which failed to make sense, or to generate meaningful affective investments. For Berlant, '[t]he genre of crisis is itself a heightening interpretive genre, rhetorically turning an ongoing condition into an intensified situation in which extensive threats to survival are said to dominate the reproduction of life' (2011, p.7). What I suggest is

that through the Rouhani campaign, the sanctions crisis was shaped into an entity that could become the delimited object of affective meaning-making.

Through this campaign, the Rouhani campaign sought to contest two forms of denial, firstly, from without, the West's lack of interest in empathising and cultivating compassion for Iran as a sanctioned nation, and from within, the previous Ahmadinejad government's denial of the pain inflicted on the nation, most famously associated with the term *Delvapassan* (the 'Worriers', the conservatives).³⁰ Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in the midst of the implementation of sanctions, had continued to claim that the people felt no ill effects, and that they were more *determined* than ever in their desire for pursuing a nuclear energy programme. In a bizarre interview, as I mentioned above, Ahmadinejad had called sanctions 'a piece of torn paper' 'by which they [the West] aim to scare Iranians' (Dawson [Reuters report, 25 January] 2007) referring to the ineffectiveness of the sanctions on Iran. In the context of severe sanctions, the government's denial that anyone was suffering, combined with the continuing emotional reverberations around the repression of the 2009 unrest, met with widespread cynicism and sometimes anger. The report below depicts what can be seen as *an affective denial* associated with the Ahmadinejad administration's public stance of positivity over the effects of sanctions.³¹ In mid-2012, as the London *Daily Telegraph* reported, 'demonstrations erupted over the soaring cost of chicken', which in a way

³⁰ I explain this term more fully below.

³¹ In an article dated 23 July 2012 on the relation between sanctions and the very high prices of staple foods, an Iranian state official was reported, very unusually, as saying 'sanctions are a full-fledged war against the Islamic Republic of Iran' (Deutsche Welt Farsi, 2012). He then confirmed that 'that the enemy has come to cripple our economy is an absolute fact'. This statement should be set against the general political line of the Ahmadinejad government, which was to publicly state that sanctions were either unimportant, or else an opportunity. This report was published in the midst of the stream of news on the soaring prices of egg, chicken and other staples and associated citizens' protests. See also (Khavand, 2012). In this connection, there was widespread anger on social media against the announcement of a cleric during Friday prayers in Mashhad that people should stop complaining about food shortages and refrain from eating chicken.

forced the then government to admit that the sanctions had had some consequences and implications for the economy. However, the report went on to claim that

In spite of the public concerns, Tehran's chief prosecutor this week instructed television stations to avoid 'bleak' reporting over the impact of sanctions and instead provide an image of 'hope and joy'. 'It is expected that the media take more responsibility and understand the circumstances of the situation and refrain from painting a bleak picture and exaggerating the problems,' Abbas Jafari Dolatabadi wrote in an opinion piece published by Fars, the state news agency. 'Instead, (the media) should create an atmosphere of hope and joy to prove that they can become a major asset in defending the Islamic Revolution.' (Blomfield, [5 September] 2012)

In 2017, reflecting back on the mismanagement of sanctions by Ahmadinejad's government, the foreign minister Javad Zarif contended that if Ahmadinejad's administration had understood the meaning of 'the torn paper', the country's wealth would not have been plundered by 'internal profiteers'.³² This comment should be seen in the context of the heightened emotions around the election of 2017. While Zarif adopts a mocking tone concerning the past ignorance of the Ahmadinejad administration, he not only conveys the previous administration's flippant carelessness as regards causing the Iranian people to suffer, but also, in a more general sense, the

³² All through the last few years there has been concern and worry about those who benefited from the imposing of sanctions, referring to the shoddy business which the governing regimes had to do with various individuals and firms in order to transfer money abroad or be able to purchase certain goods which under sanctions were prohibited.

idea that it failed to register sanctions as a significant ‘event’, to define the sanctions as crisis.

In the same vein, that of creating a different affective tone to that of the previous administration, we see how in his first official documentary of the 2013 election Hassan Rouhani emphasises his main campaigning themes, stating that he has come forward to organise a state [*Doulat*] which is that of hope, peace, moderation, and *greetings*, and which wants

to reconcile with the world, people and the intellectuals; and to end the cruelty and injustice of the pressures on the Iranian nation. (Rouhani, 2013)³³

He here not only refers implicitly to sanctions by using the word ‘pressures’, emphasising their ‘injustice’, but he reverses the terms of the previous government’s discourse by using the crucial concept of ‘cruelty’: this confirms not only the unacknowledged effects of sanctions in general, but their affective impact on the nation. He continues, in his emotive speech, to register the urgency and immediacy of the crisis, stating that ‘[ordinary] people are asking [me] why should [they witness] their children travel to Europe only to seek an ordinary life and [end up] working in gas stations?’³⁴ These were probably amongst the clearer references to the massive and

³³ This first official video was made by Hossein Dehbashi, the documentary maker, who later on seemed to fall out with Rouhani’s administration and even (in a very controversial interview he gave to a news agency, associated with a wing of the conservatives or *Delvapassan*) claimed that he had made Rouhani the president in a political climate where Rouhani was not seen as a substantial candidate or as having any chance of winning. Dehbashi was harshly criticised after the video was released on social media, shortly before the presidential election in 2017; his action was labelled as ‘a betrayal’ of the people.

³⁴ It is important to note the temporality of such references to working in gas stations or restaurants. This specific example refers to the emotional despair and depression many experienced in relation to migration after the 2009 crisis with its massive number of migrants, arguably comparable with the migration after

visible rise in emigration after the great economic collapse and also the resonances of the 2009 events which had left many in despair.

The same promotional documentary starts with an image of Rouhani standing in front of a passionate young crowd, chanting in his support, over which one hears his voice declaring:

I've come to rescue the economy and to develop constructive interaction with the world. (5:28 sec). (Rouhani, 2013) ³⁵

His voice is decisive, strong and dramatic; with the emphasis on 'I have come', it mediates a sense of a welcome arrival, that of a survivor and a rescuer: the documentary is entitled 'A Spring that is Hidden Behind the Winter' [*Bahari ke Poshteh Zemestan Mandeh Ast*] in an allusion to the country 'which has been stuck with an *undeserved* bitter cold winter' (Rouhani, 2013). This refers poetically and dramatically to the massive collapse not only of the heavily damaged economy but also to its social and cultural implications for ordinary lives. Rouhani's remarks seem not only aimed to promote a presidential candidate, but, I argue, to introduce a new compassionate discourse towards the sanctioned nation-people of Iran, the *Mellat*, thus affectively reversing, at least partially, the language of his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who branded sanctions as nothing of significance.

1979. Such references, however, are also part of a larger popular cultural memory which was formed in the 1980s in references to the hardships of life in diaspora for those who had to flee the country during and after the 1979 revolution. The expression hints at the loss in status experienced by the educated middle class and technical experts after migration.

³⁵ Each presidential candidate is allowed to broadcast two documentaries on national television, introducing his main political, economic and social priorities. Rouhani's official documentaries were arguably crucial in constructing and solidifying his image as a 'saviour' of the nation from the 'economic winter' caused by cruelty of both the West and the previous government.

At work here, as I argue, is the particular affective-discursive genre which emerged in Rouhani's presidential campaign, which marked and constructed his administration as *compassionate*, the entity which could feel and empathise with the nation's pain. This affective narrativisation could thus produce sanctions as a crisis which could be grieved over, which could be delimited and defined with the hope of ending it, so that sanctions might find their genre as event (Berlant, 2011) within a re-ordered national imaginary.

For a sense of some of the affective repertoires in social media around sanctions as crisis, I turn to comments on Zarif's Facebook page. I suggest that in evidence here are not only the affective intensity of the attachments to the compassionate state, but their fragility, their frequent turns to anxiety or mistrust. Zarif's posts on Facebook appear to be friendly and informal, mediating a sense of friendship and an eagerness to give the details of his days whilst on trips to negotiate with 'the Western counterparts' or 'the negotiators', both terms often used interchangeably to refer to the talks with the P5+1 group. I highlight, in particular, one comment on the fairly undramatic post below, which seems to have been indicative of a wider sentiment:

Javad Zarif : 23 September 2013

Hello friends,

My meeting with Mrs Ashton was positive. I explained our political will and conceptual framework to reach or achieve a solution based upon the Iranian people's right to nuclear energy and the lifting of sanctions. It is clear from the interviews she has done after (our) meeting that her impression of the meeting has

been positive. There is a meeting arranged for Thursday with 5+1 and Iran at the ministerial level, and the next meeting (after it would be in mid October.

[33k likes, 588 shares]

What a good feeling one feels when a politician values his people so much to report back to them and share issues [*masaeel*] with them [23 September 2013, 3.9 k likes]

What is noticeable here is the sense of being valued and included, of being proximate. This affective structure becomes much more apparent in the comments around the post below.

This screenshot (fig. 2) shows Zarif's account of his return from the Geneva talks (20-24 November 2013), the first round of talks after the presidential victory of Rouhani.



Figure 2: Javad Zarif's post on 24 November 2013 after arriving from the airport, (134k likes, 3,972 shares, and 28k comments) Screenshot (Zarif, 2013).

He writes:

It's 10:45 pm Sunday night, and I have just arrived home. Before posting the report I wrote and prepared for you on the plane, I wish to thank all you friends who came to welcome me at the airport. I feel very humble and I do apologise sincerely for the fact that our security guard friends did not let me leave the car. Nothing was sweeter to me than seeing you there in close proximity, however...

The rest of the rather long and meticulously detailed post revolves around the eventful and as he puts it 'stressful' talks with the negotiators. He writes in a personal, warm and informal style, mediating an attention to and a care for his 'friends' (the Iranian citizenry) in part through the detail and length of his post, in part through his 'humble' and grateful attitude. Zarif's apology further mediates a sense of humility, serving to distance him from the hierarchical power relations which prevent him, as a diplomat and politician, from getting out of the car, and instead placing him in 'proximity' to the people.

His post contains several 'personal' passages as though he is engaged in a casual discussion with a friend: 'it is 7:15 Sunday afternoon and we are flying over Turkey now, we will *inshallah* land at Mehrabad in an hour and a half, after five very difficult and tension-filled days [...] it was only after the morning prayer that we could [at last] get three hours sleep[...]'. Then, he writes about how the negotiations were a challenging task, since 'no agreement could ever cover and integrate all sides' wishes and requests'. This seems to be not only pointing to the difficulties of the negotiations *per se* but also hinting at the extent of his struggle to preserve Iran's rights, which could

potentially serve as an explanation as to why the Iranian side had to agree on some curbing of their nuclear activities.³⁶

Elsewhere in the post, emphasising the difficulties of the talks, he refers to a poem by Rumi in situating not only the problem at hand but also his own position within it: ‘both to remind myself and also to reassure you [...] that “Even if there are thousand traps in our way, if You [God] are with us, there will not be any regret or worry”’. Here, this passage seems to fit with the majority of replies underlying the loneliness of the nation in facing the sanctions and also Zarif as the manifestation of a national hero and saviour whose intention, with the help of God and prayers, is to make the suffering go away. Comments expressed overwhelmingly celebratory feelings towards this post for its significance as the one published after the first agreement and the prospect of a more permanent deal with the West. Below (fig. 3) are a few of the first replies:



Figure 3: Comments on Javad Zarif’s post on 24 November 2013. Screenshot (Zarif, 2013).

³⁶ The talks were followed by a provisional six months deal, based on a preliminary agreement whereby Iran agreed to curb some of its nuclear activities in return for some sanctions relief. This was the first ‘deal’ achieved after years of sanctions and was met with excitement by ordinary people (see also Lyons, 2015; Chapter One above).

- You are our eyes³⁷ dear doctor [heart emoji] [4 likes, 24 November 2013 at 7:40pm]

Greetings Dr Zarif, I am not into politics but I have been so hopeless in the past that I actually believed that I would take any hope for a better [future] for Iran to the grave with me. But you have awakened in me and given me a hope for a bright future again. I now understand why my family and the majority of people in Iran were happy when Dr.Rouhani became president and his administration started off. I was previously surprised when I realised they [her family] participated in the election [...] [25 November 2013, 4:04 am]

- We all owe you for your working nights, and non-stop working and tolerating all this pressure and imposed stress and worries. We have nothing [to offer you] but our heartfelt encouragement. [24 November 2013, 7:28 pm]

- Don't look at his delicacy, he's crushing six countries! [rhyming *zarif* – delicate – with *kharif* – conquering or crushing. The six countries are the P5+1] [14k likes, 24 November 2013, 7:28pm]

- The stamp of reassurance for what you did is the hopeful smiles which have settled on the faces of people in the street [3.5k likes, 24 November 2013, 7:29 pm]

³⁷ An expression which refers to trusting someone to lead you.

- God keep you safe! you are not only a national hero but also a teacher of patience and deliberation. May God make more [people like] you. [2.4 k likes, 24 November 2013, 7:36 pm]
- If I was the mayor of Tehran, I would have made a statue of the Doctor and would have placed it in the middle of Tehran's Azadi [means freedom] square, next to the symbol of Freedom. [8 likes, 24 November 2013, 9:03 pm]

Within what may be called the overarching 'compassionate state' genre, several sub-genres can be noticed. First, the simpler expressions of trust, hope and gratitude (I return below to the theme of hope). One can also identify an 'anecdotal' genre, as where the poster writing about her family narrates a sense of a reforged connection between a hitherto remote politics and ordinary life. I would note in addition a more masculinist 'hero genre', with mention of statues and 'crushing' the other side in the negotiations.³⁸ In response to an eloquent appeal made to Zarif (analysed in Chapter Five below) by another commentator, comes the comment:

[reply] It was a beautiful piece of writing. Thank you my companion-in-suffering [*hamdard*]. [3 July 2014, 26 likes]

Literally, *hamdard* means 'the one who feels your pain'. Such comments stage the empathetic 'we' which I associate here with the affective discourse of the compassionate state.

³⁸ In similar vein, another poster writes elsewhere on the page: '*Kheili mardi*' ('you're a real man').

One, extremely popular, comment on a Zarif post serves to indicate the many layers of suffering, injury and crisis that the discourse of the compassionate state attempts to contain, and to orient in the direction of sanctions and their resolution. Below I have placed a selection of comments welcoming the first, interim sanctions deal achieved on 24 November 2013:

Hello friends, here it is 4 am Sunday in Genoa (6.30am in our dear Iran). With the help of God, your resistance, patience, sobriety, the great nation bore fruit, and the negotiations ended with success. The [right to] enrichment of uranium was recognised. Our strivings will continue, and the sanctions are [now] going down. Today the nation's compassion and unity is a must more than ever. [176 k likes, 15,786 shares]

Comments:

Thanks Dr. you did it [smiley emoji] [18 likes, 24 November 2013]

My heart is warm with these fragile flames. Regardless of what the future holds, regardless of the suffering and pain there has been and will continue to be : # dear Zarif thanks.

Keep on going, man.

May God give strength to the best foreign minister of Iran from the beginning till now [24 November 2013]

Keep it up man, you are a national hero and the future president of Iran [24 November 2013, 5:04pm]

[Female] Pleeease be our foreign minister forever. Ok?

[Female]: This news is no less [in terms of its significance] than those years [the war years of 1980-88] and when the radio announced that 'Khorramshahr has

been freed'. [14 k likes, 24 November 2013] [The comment also received more than 369 replies to her comment].

Reply:

- It was not quite as big but in its own way it is huge and has made the nation happy and God satisfied [24 November 2013].
- Khorramshahr was freed but never re-built. This feels the same. Iran will never be prosperous [*abaad*] again [11 likes , 24 November 2013].
- You silly girl. Had Khorramshahr remained in the hands of Iraqis it would have remained prosperous [*abaad*] and cheerful [*khoram*] but in its own country it is still ruined. [*viraaaaan*]
- These are all nothing more than dreams. Go and think about your life There is no goodness in a clerical regime, neither for you nor for Khorramshahr [1 like , 24 November 2013].

The number of likes and replies which the comment on the relation between the agreed deal with the West and the invasion of Khorramshahr and the subsequent 1980-1988 war received was impressive in comparison with other comments archived during my fieldwork, which did not often receive more than a few likes, one reason being that replies very quickly get buried under one another. Within minutes after they are published they disappear, particularly when more comments are posted, since there are only so many comments being shown at one time, and to see the rest one needs to click on the button to load more comments. Khorramshahr, a city in southern Iran, was invaded by the Iraqi army early in the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war; it was recaptured on 24 May 1982, which marks a turning point in the war, and its liberation is celebrated every year. This comment received 369 replies, which is again among the most replies to a

comment. By juxtaposing a foreign invasion with the sanctions agreement with the West, the comment clearly resonates affectively. In equating the two events in terms of their significance, it also refers to the aggressiveness of sanctions as biopolitical regime. Juxtaposing these two events mediates the sense of crisis as it is situated in the politics of contemporary Iran through signifying sanctions in terms of memories of a previous protracted period of extraordinary violence, a national crisis marked by a sense of extreme loss and precarity. But the juxtaposition intensifies the present as well as summoning up the past. Khorramshahr as a signifier brings sanctions to 'life' as national crisis - it is a symbol of embodiment, when sanctions had previously been treated as disembodied; it territorialises the sanctions and solidifies them.

Hope, Attachment and the Object of Desire



Figure 4: Poster reads: 'Iran is alive so long as [people like] Zarif are alive'. Gathering at the airport to welcome Zarif, 24 November 2013. Photograph by Hemmat Khahi (Asre-Iran, 2013)

Given these layers of suffering and crisis that are often just below the surface, it is important to examine how hope was mobilised during the Rouhani campaign, how an orientation was constructed towards an opening in the protracted situation of crisis, and how this became associated with an attachment to the compassionate state. I contend that in many of the Facebook comments, Zarif, as embodying 'the compassionate state',

is affectively rendered as *the object of desire*, to use Lauren Berlant's term. As she points out: 'When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us' (2011, p.23). In this case, I argue, it is the Rouhani administration which gets associated with this cluster of promises, with a rich matrix of hopes and wish-feelings. What is particularly interesting is the emotionally overwhelmed/overwhelming statements, often using literary and poetic expressions, describing Zarif as the traveller, or the one on an important and spectacular mission, a journey in which the 'broken nation' will hopefully restore itself:

That travelled one, the Beloved, whose fellow-traveller is a hundred kafilas³⁹ of the heart, O God wherever he be, him, in safety from the peril of travel, keep.

[female, 3 July 2014, 9.07pm]

Javad Zarif seems to be envisioned as the one who understands and empathises with the nation, the personification, in a sense, of the compassionate state. The caravan (*kafila*) here metonymically and metaphorically stands for the nation, his fellow-traveller. It thus refers to the perilous temporality through which the nation finds itself both moving and 'waiting' or as it is often described, 'between arriving and not-arriving', in 'limbo' (*barzakh*). In this case, the nation awaits fresh news from the progression of the talks with P5+1, with their 'promises of good results'. Javad Zarif here seems to be the object through which the wishes come true; the nation restates over and over how their hope has arisen because of him. It is not Zarif, I suggest, but the compassionate state that they have found as the object of their desire.

³⁹ The Arabic word for caravan.

The object of desire, Berlant argues (2011, p.24), once envisaged as a cluster of promises, renders desire as ‘incoherent’ and ill-defined. There is, indeed, both coherence and incoherence in the ‘promises’ associated with Zarif. The desire of the vulnerable and broken-backed nation to be relieved of the burden of sanctions is linked to the prospect of Zarif’s success in negotiating with the West, with its emphasis on embodied pain as that which describes the nation. This desire is seemingly the only ‘obstacle’ to the nation’s happiness. This also speaks to the entanglement of the ‘cluster of promises’, when certain desires get highlighted, leading to the occlusion or strategic forgetting of others, such as the healing of the ‘wound’ of 2009 (I return to these ‘omissions’ in the conclusion). Below is a comment, a very typical one, in a reply to a Facebook post by Javad Zarif, when hopes of a final deal had repeatedly raised, only to be frustrated:

Doctor, I hope you'll be successful in dismantling and removing from us the evil of these sanctions that have broken our nation’s back [male, 3 July 2014]

We wish you success and health, and with fear and hope we are waiting for the practical result [male, 3 July 2014]

Here is a small choral refrain from a few months later:

You’re our hope.

You’re another Mossadegh.

You’re a real patriot.

Our generation is a burnt generation.

[3 December 2014]

I propose that it is in the hoping that the nation is imagined and thus constructed again as ‘hopeful’ and ‘optimistic’. The hopefulness is constructed and oriented towards the future of a nation only as far as a deal with the West is concerned, which again recalls Berlant’s association of ‘objects of desire’ with ‘clusters of promises’ (2011, pp.23-4). I suggest here that the emotionality surrounding sanctions creates a sense of precarity as exceptional, which can then allow the generation of a stream of hopeful attachments, which cast Zarif and the compassionate state as heroic, exceptional, and patriotic. The commentator, existing in the first person, addresses directly the second person, the figure in whom it places hope. Hope here is intertwined with fear, pain and grief; it calls them into play, but as participants in an optimistic overarching narrative genre. This hope can be associated with past political figures of hope such as Mossadegh⁴⁰, in a national-heroic mode (as in the lengthy comment stream discussed above) but also with a more transcendent realm. Zarif is a potential saviour figure, in one example a Jesus (‘God, give him the power you gave to Jesus. For He is the saviour of those whose hope depends on him.’; comment, Zarif page, 23 January 2015).

Hope, then is a sub-genre within the larger narrative genre of the compassionate state, with a repertoire of tropes. It may take the form of what I referred to earlier as an anecdotal genre, which in this case also employs the conventions of a personal, intimate letter:

⁴⁰ The democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadegh, who had aimed to nationalise the oil industry, was overthrown in a British- and American-backed coup in 1953.

Greetings Dr Zarif, I am not into politics but I have been so hopeless in the past that I actually believed that I would take any hope for a better [future] for Iran to the grave with me. But you have awakened in me and given me a hope for a bright future again... [25 November 2013, 4:04 am, quoted above]

The ‘grave’ is an oft-repeated image in comments on the sanctions, as that which one is oriented towards, or away from. Here, turning away from the grave suggests the possibility of healing the ‘crippling’ injuries to the nation which are so frequently invoked in the embodied language of the commentators, but also that this hope exists in extreme tension with the disaster that could overwhelm people if a deal is not concluded.

It is, then, the attachments, the affects surrounding Zarif and Rouhani that I wish to stress here. In order to explain how ‘clusters of promises’ could attach to these figures, I survey a few of the opinion pieces that depict and stress the emotional intensity around Rouhani’s candidature, and express doubts as to whether he has enough charisma.

There had been little sense, it seems, at the beginning of the 2013 election campaign that Rouhani as a political figure could bear the weight of people’s hopes and desires. In many articles that appeared before the election⁴¹, questions had been posed around the ethics of participating in another election after the traumatic events of 2009, when such a national crisis at the least implied an interruption of ordinary politics, when one had seen dead and injured bodies on the street, and had lived in proximity to withering hopes. In other words, many people at the time argued, inside and outside Iran, that the ‘*Zakhm-e-88*’ (the 88 [2009] wound) would not permit them to vote.

A piece by exiled journalist Aida Ghajar (2013), written during the election campaign, registers emotional intensities around notions of pain and suffering which arose after the 2009 election and which were strengthened by sanctions. Her account tends to confirm that the utilisation of suffering and pain, as we also discuss in regard to the Facebook comments, was mediated and mobilised affectively, thus enabling an attachment to Rouhani as object of desire. She asks a pertinent question, which depicts the uncertainty of many as to whether their vote this time round could be counted as ‘ethical’, or as a betrayal of those who were still suffering, or who had suffered imprisonment, violation and death.⁴²

‘ [...] Here there is a question that should be asked, whether the new sense of participatory mobilisation [in the election] which is constructed and can be felt recently in Iran...*is a result of a nostalgia or emotionality, or whether this has been created on rational grounds and based on specific reasons and values?* [my emphasis] Nevertheless and simultaneously we should not forget that the Green movement’s leaders - though they did not claim to be the leaders - Mir Hossein Mosavi and Zahra Rahnavar, are still under house arrest, and not only that many of the political prisoners are still in jail but also the calls for arrest are still

⁴² A series of opinion pieces and commentaries appeared on *Roozonline* (‘Day Online’), mainly written by more recently exiled journalists and politicians whose works sought to analyse the election ‘mood’ and to predict whether or not people would ‘again’ vote. One of the distinctions one can make between those who migrated shortly before or after the 1979 revolution, and those who felt the pressure to leave the country after 2009, is their understanding of Iran’s positionality and their own situatedness in an increasingly transnational politics where comprehending one’s political subjectivity is contingent upon the dynamics of local/global configurations. For instance, the early migratory generation tend to possess a more ‘straightforward’ and simplified categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ which almost always makes closer relations and ties between Persians or ‘Aryans’ and the West as an ‘us’, and distances itself from the Islamic Republic of Iran or what the oppositional groups often call ‘the regime’ or supporters of ‘the mullahs’, as the other. Such popular categories have been scrutinised more closely and reflected upon during the intensified sanctions and as I argue in the chapter have modified ordinary divisions of self and other as constituents of popular politics.

continuing, and the number of migrants is ever increasing. Our demands [motalebat] are still unmet, and the majority [of us] [aksariyat] have tasted the flavour of fraud, repression and suppression, violation and death, and still carry and bear the wounds of 88 (2009) (Ghajar, [12 June] 2013)

What Ghajar does in her piece is to bring in the painful memory of the past close to the vulnerable present, manifested in the national crisis of sanctions, and by intertwining the two, seems to add to the emotional intensity of the election, as we can see the journal articles below. The bodily discourse around the 2009 events is of central relevance here, though a detailed examination of it would go beyond the scope of this study. The author questions the grounds of much recent enthusiasm about the upcoming election and wonders whether they are based on sentiment or rationality; yet her response to her own questions concerns the vulnerabilities Iranians have been faced with. It seems that the ‘wounds’ they carry have turned into reasons, thus threatening to dissolve the binary distinction between bodily feeling and ‘rational’ political discourse. Whilst still defending the right to vote as a primary civil right, in reflecting upon why people want to vote Rouhani she insists that people are not voting Rouhani *per se*: their vote is to ‘break away from sanctions [Tahrimha]’, and to ‘eliminate the shadow of a war [with America]’ (Ghajar, 2013). In rejecting the arguments of those ‘boycotting’ the election, she again puts forward an argument which focuses on ‘sanctions, the probability of war and economic pressures and the shortage of drugs [as a result of sanctioning measures]’. In reverting to a more conventional political discourse, her focus is, again, not on Rouhani, but on the affective pattern associated with his campaign.

This affective pattern is what I construe here as the national pain which I see as *interrupting* the ordinariness of voting and the ordinary promises of the election (for instance the ordinary promise of the Reformists in each election for a ‘more democratic future’). The realisation of the ‘wounded nation’, and the ‘national pain’, seems to have created a rupture in the normalcy of participatory politics and ‘national duty’ [*vazifeyemelli*]. This realisation was connected, in a way that may seem surprising, to an overwhelming and accumulating sense of hopefulness, which I interpret, in Sara Ahmed’s terms (2004a) as an accumulation of affective value around sanctions. The affective intensity around the 2009 events thus became attached to sanctions as national crisis, and to Rouhani and Zarif, who, in offering the prospect of relief from sanctions, also offer a prospect of relief from a more general sense of precariousness and vulnerability.

The massive repression of what was famously branded ‘the Green Movement’ in 2009, brought about and was marked by, I argue, a sense of *political hopelessness*, particularly for millions of people who since 2004 confined their improving-reformist wishes and pursuit of the good life within the Reformists’ (*Eslah-Talaban*) framework of doing politics. For millions of Iranians who thought that within the framework of slow and steady reforms, which was continuously promoted by the Reformist faction, one could avoid loss of lives whilst securing more rights - the political mode within which the reformists particularly had operated for years - the aggressiveness shown by the state in 2009, the scale of the harsh treatment of people peacefully protesting and chanting for their votes to be counted was beyond comprehension. Particularly among young people, the tendency was to hang on to the ‘promises’ of the reformists, in the belief one could save lives or avoid the injury and imprisonment of bodies by evading

costly confrontations with the government, instead, constantly bargaining and compromising to secure more rights, though over a much longer time. This was the virtue of ‘patience’ and waiting-for-the-right-time, the political mode within which the reformists had operated for years, starting with the presidential period of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). The reformists’ ordinary promises, promoted at the outset by the then president Mohammad Khatami, such as peaceful and slow reforms, political and societal progress, economic prosperity and growth and expansion of citizenship rights, albeit within a very restrictively gendered and heteronormative framework, seemed particularly withered, exhausted, and worn-out. It is also significant that part of the more recent debates surrounding the reformists’ future as a faction focused on their never-ending compromising attitude in relation to the conservatives (Principalists) to the extent that the term *Estemrar-Talaban*⁴³ was used, partially with an embedded sarcasm, to critique their retreat from wishing to engage in serious reform - meaning improvement in political, societal and economic arenas- to only seeking stability of the regime, at the expense of giving up on the grand narratives of the Reformists which had been made famous and widespread in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Thus, before and during the 2013 presidential campaign, the focus of reform-oriented Farsi e-journals and news platforms was twofold, whether published inside or outside the country: a concentration on election ‘boycotters’ and the fear that people would deliberately forgo their opportunity to participate; but also the proposing of an optimism, a so-far-suspended ‘better future’, associated here with the political possibility of relieving sanctions. To relieve the sanctions, and so the miseries and

⁴³ ‘Seeking continuity’ (*Estemrar-Talaban*) as opposed to trying to ‘improve’ and face the challenges of addressing the people’s civil and individual rights.

harshness of life associated with it, was to provide the public with an ethical and moral reasoning for wanting to vote again, and this in a political system which had led them to watch protestors being injured and killed (whether they identified with them as fellow protestors, or not), one which had made them feel and live as ‘vulnerable’ in their homes, and on the streets. Here, then, the vulnerability is not consistently and equally visible; its origins are not always obvious. The economic sanctions (*tahrim*) were thus incorporated into the affective underpinnings of a public which had appeared in 2009 in a more coherent and structured manner, as a movement which could be taken as a normative object of academic and media inquiry.

Hassan Rouhani’s *persona* on its own, then, seems not to have had the effect the media and the political commentators expected for a presidential victory. In a piece published on 11 June 2013, Ammar Maleki,⁴⁴ a political activist⁴⁵, and the son of a prominent dissident politician, argued that since he was not convinced that a clean election lay ahead, he would not encourage people to vote – although giving some support to ‘protest voting’ in the absence of a ‘clean’ and ‘free’ election in Iran⁴⁶. In disagreeing with those who argued that any form of voting, including ‘protest votes’, would be legitimising⁴⁷ the Islamic republic, he argued that many who voted for Mohammad Khatami in 1997, 2001 and 2005, for Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi in

⁴⁴ He is the son of a prominent *Melli Mazhabi* politician who has not been able to visit his family outside the country as he has been banned from leaving travelling abroad.

⁴⁵ I refer to activists and journalists as ‘self-exiled’ to refer to the precariousness within which they locate themselves. Many of them have left the country voluntarily or stayed beyond their visas as students and research fellows etc. This mostly applies to people who left after the 2009 protests and decided not to go back for fear of arrests and the complications involved. Their positionalities are uncertain and precarious.

⁴⁶ This is usually a reference to the determining power of the Guardian Council.

⁴⁷ Legitimation has always been part and parcel of discussions around every election in Iran; nevertheless, the debate entered a more complex and multilayered context after the 2009 elections, that were widely believed to be fraudulent, and the concomitant harsh suppression of ordinary people’s protests.

2009, and ‘even’⁴⁸ those wishing to vote for Hassan Rouhani would consider their vote a mode of protest opposing the *status quo* (Maleki, 2013). He further contended that in spite of the positive outlook which was created after Mohammad Reza Aref, a Reformist candidate, announced he was stepping down in support of Rouhani, the Reformists (*Eslah-Talaban*) only had a slim chance of gaining enough votes to win decisively and prevent the election going to the second round (Observer, 2013). One of his other, rather interesting arguments, which was repeated across different media platforms, concerned the Guardian Council’s disqualification of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, ex-president and one of the founders of the Islamic Republic, from standing as a presidential candidate⁴⁹. Maleki argued that this sent a message from the ruling class strongly rejecting any desire for a passionate and mobilised election campaign run by a candidate who could present a symbol of standing against the status quo (Maleki, 2013). Here, the association of Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani with closer, stronger ties to ordinary people and what they wanted, and the positioning of him as against the ruling class, should be understood in its temporal and spatial specificities particularly after the 2009 protests broke out. Hashemi Rafsanjani performed his last and most controversial Friday Prayer since the 1979 revolution in Tehran in the midst of uprisings. Rafsanjani’s support and specifically, I argue, ‘empathy’ with the injured and those contesting the election, even though declared in a very politically ‘balanced’ and ‘neutral’ tone, angered the ruling class, and he was unofficially banned from performing Friday prayer until his death. The crowds appearing for this Friday prayer, mostly comprising of the youth, Green movement supporters and those upset and

⁴⁸ The author’s use of the word ‘even’ resonates with the seriousness of the doubt and worry of many who could not envision that a political figure like Hassan Rouhani, with his close relationship with conservatives and the more traditional sectors, could become an object of desire for people who strongly felt disillusioned after the 2009 protests in the wake of the presidential election, judged to be fraudulent.

⁴⁹ The speculation was that the Guardian Council feared that Rafsanjani would enjoy success in his attempts to mobilising people and that the election would ‘get out of hand’.

shocked at the brutal treatment of ordinary protesters by the police, arguably differed in their appearance and political outlook from those who would be normally considered as ‘Friday prayer goers’ and considered as more traditional, inclined to the Principalists. In his speech, Rafsanjani recalled how the Prophet established his first mosque after consulting people regarding its location and structure, concluding that Islamic and republican principles went hand in hand in Islam and could not be separated (Fantoom, 2013, cited in Fozi, 2015, p.66). This was perceived as a critique, not only of the way in which the unrest was handled but more significantly of the Supreme Leader itself, and this certainly had serious consequences for Rafsanjani, of which his forced isolation was only the tip of the iceberg.⁵⁰

Other articles spanned varying, yet overall similar, viewpoints, seeing the 2013 election as signifying a possible reconciliation, following the perceived ‘break’ between the people and the governing regimes, and the people’s ‘estrangement’ (*ghahr*), after the 2009 election (see, for example, Shafeei, 2013) or seeing the forthcoming election as a space outside the politics of both the Reformists and traditional Principalists (for example, Rahbar, 2013)⁵¹ seen as not resourceful or helpful enough during the last eight years of massive economic and social complications in the country many associated with the sanctions. Likewise, Taghi Rahmani, a political activist close to the *Melli-Mazhabi* faction, argued that after the loss of their hope that Khatami would stand in the election again, people re-invested their hope in Rafsanjani, while after Rafsanjani’s disqualification, the hope was re-oriented towards Mohammad Reza Aref (another ‘moderate’) and Rouhani; he concluded that this showed that people in this election

⁵⁰ For example, his children’s economic activities were monitored as a way of pressurizing their father.

⁵¹ The article, which appeared on *Roozonline* on June 11, was entitled: ‘Ta lahze-ye rouhani ye mardom [To the sacredness of the public]’. There is a play on words here: ‘Rouhani’ refers both to ‘sacredness’ and to the name of the candidate.

tended to combine individual-oriented but also civil society-oriented [*Nahad-e-Madani*] approaches, focused both around individual ‘needs’ and collective ‘demands’ (Rahmani, 2013). This conclusion is rather interesting for its implicit dismissal of the notion of Hassan Rouhani as capable of and/or already possessing the persona or charisma one might associate with a public figure, like Khatami and Rafsanjani. The article refers to a concept which the writer argues is ‘historically specific’ to Iran, what he calls *Sazegari-ye-Irani* (an ever-compromising Iranian spirit of ‘live-and-let-live’) as the most prominent feature of this election and argues that people want to participate in this election and to tell their rulers (*Hakeman*) that they are tired (*khasteh*) of the existing situation (Rahmani, 2013)⁵². Nevertheless even amongst those not optimistic about what a Rouhani presidency could achieve, there was still, post-election, the realisation of a sense of relief from an affective burden, at any rate, a sense of happiness and laughter in the air.⁵³

I am, then, endeavouring to place in context the strong attachments that formed around Javad Zarif as chief sanctions negotiator on the Iranian side, through which political subjects were oriented towards a possible future. His president and colleague, Rouhani, was inheritor and beneficiary of a particular accumulation of affects, shaped by a recent history which involves not only national and international governments and states, but the Iranian public. The Rouhani campaign certainly exploited and directed these feelings, but in a certain sense was no more than their fortunate depository.

⁵² See also Ramezani (2013), Rahbar (2013), Mohammadi (2016).

⁵³ See Saf-Sari (2013). The sense of fatigue with the situation, a separation from what was experienced and ‘hoped for’ and also a disillusionment with Reformist ideas (Mohammadi, 2016) remain, however, recurring themes in Facebook comments on Javad Zarif’s page.

Conclusion

In the election campaign of May and June 2013, Hassan Rouhani and his campaigning team managed to take a commanding lead, and subsequently swept the country with an emphatic victory. As I have argued, the theme of the accumulation of an ‘unacknowledged pain’, the suffering caused by the sanctions, particularly after the Comprehensive Act (CISADA; 2010), was picked up on by Rouhani during the campaign. It occurred at a time when ordinary citizens, both within and outside Iran, were harshly hit by the sanctions and the prospect of the main political factions succeeding in mobilising people to vote seemed rather doubtful. Yet Rouhani’s campaign team did manage to turn the page, and to bring about a highly successful and engaged election which unfolded around rescuing the country and bringing back prosperity. Through the unfolding of ‘hope’ as an important theme and genre within the campaign, Rouhani and his team became beneficiaries not only of a desire for empathy, but of wish-feelings around the prospect of an end to sanctions that created new objects of optimistic attachment (Berlant, 2008a, 2011).

I have argued that the affective discourse of the compassionate state, in its acknowledgement of suffering, produces sanctions as a definable, even resolvable crisis, as against the familiar mode of extended crisis which offered little possibility of affective investment or generic narrativisation. The discourse of the compassionate state, which can be characterised as a genre, constructs the Iranian foreign minister and hence the compassionate state as ‘objects of desire’, associated with certain attachments, or ‘clusters of promises’, which foreground certain hopes and in the process occlude other hopes, desires and griefs. In this sense, arguably, the national imaginary is re-oriented in relation to the source of national injury, which is now rather

external than internal. As such, sanctions can find ‘their genre of event’ (Berlant, 2011, p.4) as a specific and delimited form of national crisis, though, as I have shown, this is never a genre that is final or uncontested. Through this empathetic acknowledgement, sanctions form themselves as an exceptional precarity and exceptional crisis; simultaneously, there emerges an understanding of the state as compassionate, and the compassionate state and its promises become what people orient themselves towards. In the next chapter, we discuss the forms of intimacy that the public presumes in relation to this state, and how the ordinary is finally able to claim a special vulnerability once denied, which supports a particular version of politics.

Chapter Five: The Vulnerable Public



Figure 5: [left] a Victory sign on a green background with a plastered finger saying ‘we maintain’ [resisting and remaining]. [centre] hand showing forefinger marked for voting, also wearing plaster; Hashtag reads: ‘remember’; [right] family goes to vote, carrying the green colours of Mir Hossein Mousavi and the purple of Rouhani [by same artist as image on left]

Introduction

I begin with three images which went viral on social media platforms during the 2017 election campaign. The pictures were created and widely used in campaigns promoting Rouhani in 2017 in his second presidential contest, concentrating on registering the pain and suffering the nation had to endure; with the image of a wounded forefinger, which

is also the finger that citizens use to vote. These visual signifiers of suffering, created by an Iran-based artist-activist, recalled and followed up on similar imagery in the 2013 election (fig. 5 above, image on right). They signify, I argue, a vulnerable, collective body, marked by a national wound, in order to mediate the urgency and immediacy of voting Rouhani for the public. It is this mediated vulnerability that is the focus of this chapter, as I explain further below.

In many ways the 2017 presidential election which resulted in the second presidential term for Hassan Rouhani, if not more significant than 2013, was an equally tense and stressful event; thus in reproducing what I call the ‘vulnerable past’, Rouhani’s 2017 campaign became a site of ‘remembering the past’ as highly affective, visceral and temporal. It is not only 2013 and the sanctions crisis that is referenced in the images above. The green background of each image specifically refers to the Green movement of 2009, and its painful resonances in the present. The sticking plaster images were met with great support and were juxtaposed with hashtag campaigns like #Remember [*Be Yaad Aar*] and #we don’t go back [*Be Aghab Baz Nemigardim*], both of which focused on and revolved around Rouhani’s campaign as that which saved ‘us’ from sanctions. In referring to the embodied implications of sanctions for the ordinary lives, these hashtags sprung up to narrate the ordinary stories of sanctions involving intimate accounts of patients with cancers, immune nerve diseases, dialysis patients and many more who could not afford the rising price of drugs or had lost their loved ones.

In a similar vein, the picture below (fig. 6), which went viral across different social media platforms, depicts a man whose car seems to have become a moving platform advocating a vote for Rouhani. The posters on the car state that the man has lost his

beloved child because the necessary drugs could not be found to treat his cancer in the midst of the post-2010 sanctions. The loss and grief here is attached to the cluster of wish-feelings around Rouhani: one poster states that he will vote Rouhani so no one will experience the pain he had to endure. Rouhani is thus positioned as having the power to heal in a very specific and embodied way. Along with foreign minister Zarif, he becomes the focus of affective attachments which construct him as a saviour/healer figure. These pictures demonstrate the extent of the performative language of embodiment around the campaign and in particular, modes of vulnerability.



Figure 6: Car with election posters of Rouhani. This image appeared on many platforms, including Facebook and Instagram and was used in hashtags in supporter of Rouhani @ *Kaleme* (news site), 8 May 2017.

It is the affective modes and genres of vulnerability generated on social media during the 2013-15 sanctions negotiations that I discuss in this chapter. As in the previous chapter, I look at emotions not in isolation but as situated, as intertwined with particularities of context. Previously I expounded on how the ‘compassionate state’ provided a space of recognition, making possible an acknowledgement of a national pain. In focusing on this space, I track the rhetorics of ‘a traumatised core national

identity' (Berlant 1997, p.3) which have come to describe and shape what I call the *vulnerable public*. The compassionate state, in enabling a vulnerable public, can be construed as providing a 'space of appearance' (Arendt, in Butler, 2016, p.14) for this previously unacknowledged pain, through which a new national imaginary as suffering nation is attained.

I focus here mainly on the Facebook page of Javad Zarif, which, I contend, offers a space wherein one can track modes of national imaginary and forms of identifications between subjects and the nation. Within this space, which I see as 'a space of appearance' for the political, narratives of suffering and pain seems to have dominated Iranians' political identifications with nationality. As I later explain, these narratives foreground the suffering or injured body. Recalling Ahmed's work on orientationality (2006), I trace here how feelings about the nation, or political identifications with national identity, for Iranians, are oriented towards the idea of the nation as vulnerable. This appears to mean that attachment (which I have discussed in the previous chapter) has a prior condition, which consists in accepting the nation first and foremost in such terms. The notion of vulnerability as inevitably involving injury, 'weakness' or 'passivity' (Butler et al, 2016, p.3) may be questionable, given that, in Butler's terms, vulnerability emerges through our relation to other people and is 'constitutive of our capacity for action.' (Sabsay, 2016, p.285) Nonetheless, the question remains: how to frame an imagined nationality which first and foremost conceives of itself in the normative sense of vulnerable, that is, as injured and injurable. This involves considering how vulnerability is staged politically, and thus the generic forms through which it is staged. I propose that the acceptance of the nation as suffering, as enabled by the formation of the compassionate state, here allows the space of appearance to be

exceptionally open and intimate. Within this space, I will be tracking the intertwinement of intimacy and vulnerability as constituent of and as generative of narrative genre.

Part of how vulnerability is staged involves exposure, the sharing online of stories of bodies, agonies and lives. This sharing of exposures presumes, I would argue, an intimacy, which in turn is made possible through the space afforded by the compassionate state, and Javad Zarif's Facebook page in particular. As already discussed, Berlant has developed the term 'intimate publics' to conceptualise the ways in which citizens are attached to dreams and fantasies of the good life (2008a, 2011). In Berlant's terms, these intimate publics are structured not only around a sense of shared feelings, but around what she defines as narrative genres mediated via mass culture, structures of expectation which not only shape cultural texts, but one's experience itself. The definition of the term would include, but is not limited to, the deployment of intimacy by politicians such as Bill Clinton or Barack Obama in order to connect with their publics (Woodward, 2004; Escobar, 2011; Pedwell, 2014). In this approach, a genre (such as melodrama or romance) 'is always a scene of potentiality, a promise of a certain affective experience' (2008a, p.271), 'an aesthetic structure of affective expectation' (2008a, p.4)', even 'an affective contract' (2011, p.66) around which intimate publics form themselves. Here, it is possible to align Berlant's sense of genre with communicative and discursive genres as defined by Lomborg (2011, 2014) and Fairclough (1995, 2003), in that genres 'do' something, they enable and structure forms of social practice, of communicative utterance.

What narrative genres associated with an intimate public do, Berlant argues, is to incite longing, which has an element of excess (2008a); they have a structure of expectation

which is affective, which mobilises a sense of potential and openness, rather than being tied only to particular named emotions. Affective excess or potential, however, far from subverting the order of discourse, or promising liberation, as in Papacharissi's account (2014; Chapter Two), actually works, most of the time, to reinforce the existing order, for example, neoliberal capitalism. So 'utopianism' may be 'in the air' (Berlant, 2008a, p.5), 'but one of the main utopias is normativity itself' understood to be 'a felt condition of general belonging and an aspirational site of rest and recognition in and by a social world' (ibid.). In drawing on Berlant's notions of shared 'longing' as key to the formation of genres and publics, I note the partial convergence here with the approaches of Ferreday (2011), who, in tracing the iteration of desire and attachment in speech acts on social media, also emphasises the 'longing', the element of desire and projective fantasy, in belonging. Suffering becomes a form of national belonging, I argue, in part through genres of intimate longing. In the next section, I examine the generic forms that intimacy takes on Zarif's Facebook page, in order to establish this intimacy as a ground for the exposure of vulnerabilities.

The politics of intimacy and the vulnerable public

In November 2013, an interim sanctions agreement was reached; there was then a six month deadline for reaching a final agreement, which was not met when Iran and the P5+1 met six months later. This marked an extended period of agony and anxiety for ordinary Iranians, while a series of talks continued until reaching a resolution in July 2015. These comments were among thousands posted on the Facebook page of Javad Zarif, chief sanctions negotiator for the Iranian side. I chose these comments because they repeat favourite tropes:

Only Iranian people know how difficult a task has been placed on your shoulders. All of our lives are involved in this matter [to reach a permanent deal with the West on relaxing sanctions on Iran]. May God take away the harshness of sanctions that have broken our backs and have crushed the nation [3 July 2014, comment on Zarif's Facebook page].

Even just as followers of the negotiations we are tired. May God give you strength as the person who is actually dealing with these six powers.

Woe. God, God give you strength. [23 November 2014]

These comments mediate a sense of intimacy through highlighting an exceptional mutual understanding between the nation and Zarif. The stress on the word 'only' conveys a sense of the impossibility of this understanding existing in any other context. By doing so, it creates a space of intimacy and proximity. The emphasis on the injured body manifested in the use of the reference to 'our' 'broken' backs, which is a phrase in

popular language used to refer to harshness, also registers the significance of embodying the nation as vulnerable. The image of ‘broken backs’ relates to a recurring trope that is used in a range of comments on both Zarif’s and Parpanchi’s (BBC Farsi) pages. ‘Broken backs’ should also be seen in relation to ‘the *crippled* nation’ or ‘*crippling* sanctions’, which were normative phrases used on Western media platforms to refer to sanctions. The use of the second person is also typical, although it is always in the form of the respectful ‘you’ (*shoma*), not the more direct ‘you’ (*to*). This space of intimacy casts vulnerability mostly in bodily registers, in that terms, concepts and phrases performatively invoke embodiment.

This assumed intimacy generates certain forms of writing, among which we refer to the most repeated ones. Through intimacy, people assume a sphere of proximity with the state, or in Ahmed’s terms (2004a) they attach or orient themselves to the state as a proximate object. For Lauren Berlant, as I have already discussed in Chapter Four above, attachments work to form objects of desire, which are really ‘a cluster of promises’ that ‘we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us’ (Berlant, 2011, p.23). Berlant argues ‘

that to phrase the “object of desire” as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what’s incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of our *endurance* in the object, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises’ (Berlant, 2011, p.23).

It may be this sense of ‘endurance’ in the object, despite everything, that is noticeable in the above letters, in that Zarif’s distance from his petitioners is always referred to or implicit, yet this distance only stimulates the desire for proximity.

Berlant’s concept of ‘intimate publics’, while very pertinent in the above cases, needs to be elaborated on here through consideration of how publics develop forms of utterance out of what appears to be their very ‘weakness’ and incoherence. I thus develop further the concept of the *vulnerable public* as a way of defining specific forms of political subjectivity within the affective framework of this study. As I have already pointed out, drawing on the critiques developed by Butler et al. (2016), vulnerability in conventional and mainstream political conceptualisations tends to be ‘understood only as victimisation and passivity, invariably the site of inaction’ (2016, p.1). Thus liberal human rights approaches tend to limit vulnerability to and ‘equate [it] with injurability, referring to the possibility of being exposed to injury or attack’ (Sabsay, 2016, p.285). ‘Etymologically, vulnerability comes from late[sic] Latin *vulnerabilis*, from Latin *vulnerare*: “to wound”, from *vulnus*, “a wound”’ (ibid.).

In Butlerian terms (2009, 2016), there are two principal modes of approaching and defining vulnerability. The first is a body’s capacity to be wounded or injured. But Butler identifies a second characteristic, which she refers to as the way the body ‘comes up against the outside world’ (2009, p.34), which is ‘a sign of the general predicament of unwilling proximity to others and to circumstances beyond one’s control.’ ‘And yet [Butler tells us], this obtrusive alterity against which the body finds itself can be, and often is, what animates responsiveness to that world.... Such affects, I would argue,

become not just the basis, but the very stuff of ideation and of critique.’ (2010, p.34)⁵⁴ Moreover, in this argument, although vulnerability is linked to a human existential condition of ‘precariousness’, for her, this general human condition of precariousness is subsumed under the historically specific conditions in which ‘precarity’ is actualised, felt, spoken of. The unequal distribution of vulnerability, precarity and (as I shall discuss in Chapter Six) grievability thus prompts critique in the form of challenges to universalistic discourses which elide questions of otherisation and racialisation.

Vulnerability, for Butler, is not a ‘feeling’ in the sense of a state that is internal to the subject – it ‘characterizes a relation to a field of objects, forces and passions that impinge on or affect us’ (Butler, 2016, p.25). Butler’s long-term philosophical and political project, indeed, involves questioning the idea of a bounded, non-permeable self, and since 9/11, a bounded body (Lloyd, 2015). In *Frames of War*, she questions ‘whether the body is rightly defined as a bounded kind of entity’ (Butler 2010, p.52). Unwilled, unchosen exposure to others is what constitutes the self, in her argument: ‘this exposure that I am constitutes my singularity’ (Butler, 2005, p.33). It also constitutes the basis for ethical and political action, in that one is tied, across boundaries of self and body, to others. In resisting their status as less than human, as ungrievable, bodies congregate in public space, yet ‘[f]or Butler,... this space is irreducibly corporeal [...]: a space where bodies appear to other bodies. It is vulnerability understood as sensate impressionability that enables this, that allows the corpus of the other to appear to us (and vice versa)’ (Lloyd, 2015, pp.178-9). Regarding corporeality,

⁵⁴ Butler by no means goes as far as some Massumi disciples in their enthusiastic openness to affective flow, viz. ‘The vulnerable becomes an unstoppable embodiment of life (Shildrick, 2002) that constantly reminds us of the change that occurs – outside and within – the fragile confines of a ‘body’... In its radical openness, the vulnerable subject is always encountering and being encountered, moving towards and being moved by others.’ (Haas, Garcia, 2015).

one might argue that in the Farsi Facebook pages where vulnerability is articulated, the other does not ‘appear to us’ as a physically vulnerable body, and there is little sense of a shared risk of prison or state violence, as was the case in the street protests of 2009. To be sure, Butler allows that media, including, presumably online media, may be part of the ‘infrastructural support’ of protest movements, and even ‘establish new spatio-temporal dimensions of the public sphere’ for those who do not engage in visible protests for reasons of ‘coercion, fear or necessity’ (2016, p.14). Nonetheless, these qualifications do not go far enough in re-admitting political articulations of the bodily into online spaces, viewed from the perspective of this project. Rather, I contend that the mediated sense of bodily vulnerability is indeed what is noticeable in these online comment streams, and this has to do, in part with the embodied memory of previous crises, of the 2009 events, as well as the ongoing constitution of sanctions as crisis. Physical vulnerability as political articulation is thus not only associated, as in Butler’s recent examples, with political demonstrations in physical spaces (2016).⁵⁵ In the next chapter, I will reflect in more depth on what this relationality between bodies entails.

As Letitia Sabsay points out, for Butler, ‘vulnerability cannot be reduced to injurability’, it ‘emerges from subjects’ relationality’, that is, our relation to other people and is ‘constitutive of our capacity for action.’ (Sabsay, 2016, p.285) She introduces a further level, however, which is permeability, our openness to others as a way of being in the world. As she says, this relates closely to Butler’s more general definition of

⁵⁵But while my argument differs from Butler’s in that respect, I am interested in her perspective that it is only physical proximity that allows us to ‘see’ the other; given that a central point of mine is that vulnerability is deployed online to make distinctions between Self and Other, Us and Them, as part of the constitution of a public. One might suggest, in this context, that it is not necessary that the other physically ‘appear to us’, only that it be discursively constructed as Other, outside the Self, perhaps implying a process of essentialist binarisations which is somewhat removed from the formation of the kind of progressive public, centred around resistance, that Butler envisages (2016).

vulnerability, the capacity to be affected, to be impinged upon, rather than to Butler's notion of vulnerability as differentially distributed, involving, for example, precariousness. Crucially, Sabsay connects permeability to both of our key preoccupations, affect and the utterance. Following Bakhtin (1986), she argues for the notion of the subject as open in the sense of being dialogic, in that each of its utterances is formed in expectation of an answering utterance. The subject is thus 'a polyphonic palimpsest for which self and other can hardly be differentiated' (Sabsay, 2016, p.286). But her argument also implicitly invites us to recall the definition of affect as 'the capacity to affect and be affected' (Massumi, 1987). Both permeability and affect, then, though never presocial or prediscursive, in her view, are seen as prior to our will, and constitute the conditions of utterance. Yet, she points out, while vulnerability may be mobilised in a way that opens up relations between self and other, in Butler's sense, it may also serve as 'affirmation of injurability and victimhood' in rather 'contrary' ways (Sabsay, 2016, p.287); for example, it may be deployed not only in the discourse of the subaltern, but in regimes of governmentality, as will become evident in Chapter Six.

Vulnerability as mediated genre

I analyse utterances of vulnerability in connection with expectations and conventions which we can call generic. As discussed in Chapter Three, genre is not simply about the deployment of a certain content or style – people 'do' genre, and genre 'does' something, as part of social, communicative, interaction (Lomborg, 2011, p.68). In Chapter Four above, I framed the compassionate state as a genre, the function of which included the constitution of sanctions as a specific and defined genre of crisis. Here, I argue that what people do in this context, in articulating vulnerability, and what

vulnerability as a genre does, is to generate and perform forms of belonging and distinction, delineating relations between oneself (be it an individual or a group) and others. In a broader sense, this belonging relates to the national imaginary, the injured nation which finds its acknowledgement in the new Rouhani administration. But there is a more specific and directed sense of belonging which is connected to the constitution of a political public, in however ephemeral or fragmented a form, which puts a certain pressure, coherent or not, upon the government it elected.

In a post of July 2014, entitled ‘Iran’s message: we can make history’, Zarif introduced a video message on the Vienna negotiations, which had just started. Framed as an urgent report from the front line, he emphasises in this text that he and his team would make their best efforts but the result would be ‘very difficult’ to predict.

Hi friends. Now it is 5.40 in the morning in Vienna, which is 8.10 in Iranian time. The new round of negotiations started yesterday and the discussions will be conducted intensely for the next two weeks. Given the complexity and interlinkedness of many subjects that will come up in order to reach a comprehensive agreement, it will be a very difficult task to predict the result of the talks, and the sort of predictions that the media make particularly in the West should be not taken very seriously because more than analyzing and mediating the news they try to influence and shape the talks. What I can reassure you about is the fact that my colleagues and I will do our best to achieve a sustainable and logical resolution, and on this very difficult path we need, more than ever, your support and prayers in this month of Ramadan....

[41 k likes, 2,328 shares, 3 July 2014].

In the video (Zarif, 2014), which is in English, with Farsi subtitles, Zarif distinguishes between two layers of discourse. On one level, he acknowledges the pain caused by sanctions, and thus differentiates himself from the discourse of the previous Ahmadinejad administration (this affective work of differentiation was discussed in Chapter Four above). At another level, nevertheless, he reiterates the continuing and increased strength of Iran's nuclear programme.

In response, the comments below, phrased in heartfelt, passionate, and informal terms, convey the frequent and repeated tropes and rhetorical figures favoured by users in their responses to the post by Zarif:

- Dear Doctor, please don't make us despair with slogans like 'sanctions are ineffective', please convince the West to lift the sanctions. The sanctions that you say didn't have any effect are the lives of young people like me who are studying in misery and don't have any career prospects. [3 July 2014]

- Doctor, swear on whatever is holy to you, do something for people. The situation is like this for people like us, who are supposedly the middle class, whose situation gets worse day by day. God knows what's happening with people who are worse off. People eat bread, not 20% enriched uranium. Doctor, don't make people's hope disappear. [3 July 2014, 332 likes]

The first comment is interesting in that it seems to have misinterpreted the video as not acknowledging the effect of sanctions for ordinary people - the language seems to convey panic and fear. By bringing in the word ‘despair’, in relation to ‘slogans’ about sanctions being ‘ineffective’, the comments registers the relation between the state as the object of desire, with the potential of creating national attachments, and the ordinary public. What is interesting is that at no point in the video does Zarif state that ‘sanctions are ineffective’; what seems to have generated panic, as mediated by the first comment, was his repeated emphasis that the nuclear programme has only increased in scale in the face of sanctions, which may have recalled the previous Ahmadinejad government’s continuous and consistent denial that sanctions were hurting the people.

The comment powerfully suggests the significance of the compassionate state’s acknowledgement of people’s pain, as creating a new intimate bond with the public, a bond that is here deemed to be threatened. There are, however, replies to this comment, reassuring the commentator that Zarif did acknowledge ‘our’ (the people’s) suffering in the video. The second commentator makes two hard-hitting statements, the first one very embodied in its references: ‘People eat bread, not 20% enriched uranium’; she then recalls Rouhani’s election theme: Zarif may have generated ‘hope’, but he risks making it ‘disappear’.

The following is a comment, which appeared some time later, on the same Zarif post.⁵⁶

Like many other posts, it can be generically positioned as a litany of suffering, characterised by a rhetorical and affective variation on a repeated theme. It also

⁵⁶As I explained in Chapter Three, it is important to return regularly to the comment streams, given that new comments often get posted a long time after the original post. This comment was made nineteen months after the post, just before the final round of negotiations.

resembles the previous comment in that it not only uses a language that is evocative of embodiment, but employs a style that is definitional:

In what language do I need to say you that we don't want nuclear power? At what expense do we have nuclear power? At the expense of a sick child in his dad's arms, dying because of not having enough money for drugs? At the expense of poverty and prostitution among the youth? At the expense of children sleeping with empty stomachs? At the expense of fathers losing their jobs? Really, at what expense? If we open our eyes[we see] sanctions have affected us, in fact affected us immensely. Really, people don't deserve to live like this. This is because of too many expectations from over-privileged kids [the over-privileged who acquire their wealth through politics]. You please do whatever you can with your own hands to lift the sanctions quickly. The eyes of Iran and its children are on you.[male, 13 February 2015, 11.05pm 1 like]

Here he uses the phrase 'in what language do I need to say to you...' which recurs a lot in other comments, as I expand on further below. He is searching for a language to convey this accumulated intensity of embodied pain in many bodies, yet, paradoxically, he seems to have found one. Like the previous commentators, he has been roused, it seems, by Zarif's argument that Iran has been affected at the level of ordinary lives, but not in terms of its power as a nation. Yet the lament takes place within a particular framework, where the social ideal is the male as head of the family. He twice refers to fatherhood, three times to children and once to prostitution.

The messages below are also highly affective and corporeal in their performative language, which again registers how narratives based on the bodily are the favoured modes of articulation, yet at the same time they foreground a particular sense of weakness and exposure. This exposure is made possible by a presumption of intimacy which allows one to foreground one's feelings associated with humiliation and shame, for not providing for the family, which is conceived a direct result of sanctions.

- Help me Mr foreign minister I'm going mad from being jobless thought of suicide isn't leaving me if it wasn't because of my wife I would have been finished by now I'm ashamed in front of my wife that I'm jobless please take my message to the [Iranian] President I studied for four years but it hasn't had any benefits for me I want a job life has become very difficult help me I am very depressed nothing makes me happy [punctuation as in original] [Zarif page, 17 December 2014]

- Sanctions are the dead mother of my classmate who did not have the money for his mum's heart surgery. Sanctions mean anti-cancer drugs with a salary of 600,000 toman. Sanctions mean when you are in a car passing a line of young women who are selling (themselves) for 50,000 toman. Sanctions mean that you're waiting for your forty-five toman subsidy. Sanctions mean 30,000 toman for a kilo of meat for the family of a labourer. Sanctions mean 20m toman for a Pride [Iranian made car].

- In what language do I need to say to you that I do not want nuclear energy, at the expense of my youth and my life. I would sell my right [to nuclear energy],

instead I want a job, a house, and money for my dowry. I don't know what the problem is with your back Mr Zarif, but I understand your pain. Pain starts in my back and goes down to my feet, I can't sit, walk, or sleep. I have given in to the pain, I will die of this pain because I have no money to go to a doctor. I am telling you about all this misery to tell [you] that there are people who are alive but have many, many times wished for death. Do something to lift the sanctions. Do something to make housing and food cheaper, so that the price of medicine doesn't cost our blood and flesh, so we can have safety and certainty. For God's sake, we have had enough of sanctions. Someone once said, [they] should make the graves of the 60s generation [referring to the 1980s, to the children born during the 1980-1988 war with Iraq] deeper because they will need to store all their dreams with them in there.' [Zarif's Facebook page, 11 July 2014, female]

Each comment maintains and increases the affect of urgency and intensity as it lists and vividly evokes embodied sufferings and material deprivations, often marked by a repeated word or phrase, such as 'sanctions mean', or 'pain'. Looking at the emotional intensity which is noticeable above, I contend that these affects take shape within the limits of a heteronormative framework where feelings of humiliation and shame, as presented here, are highly gendered. For instance, a man's inability to provide for his family is utilised to mediate a particular shamefulness, in that the story is expected to come across as exceptionally affective or emotionally provocative. It is also noteworthy that although these emblematic narratives may be to do with particular individuals, they can also be interpreted as an endeavour to form accumulated intensity around particular affective tropes, to give stories greater emotional 'stickiness' (Ahmed, 2004a). These

techniques are particularly associated with the use of social media, when the aim is frequently to leave a comment or reply which carries and/or has the potential to generate the most emotional intensity. Whether the comments are from men or women, the suffering bodies, as mentioned above, are framed in heteronormative terms, which conceive certain roles in a gendered context in order to maximise their effect. Despair and grief are associated with particular attributions: for example, loss of money, of pride in front of one's family, of meat for one's family, as well as 'fathers losing their jobs' (see comment above) are understood as associated with masculinity; on the other hand, loss of dowry and honour (via prostitution) are associated with femininity. Within this framework, it is also understandable that certain heteronormative tropes get picked up on or circulated more frequently, in what Wetherell (2012, p.79) calls 'normative sequences', precisely because they can resonate more easily within a given socio-historical structure of feeling (Williams, 1977).

Another long post mediates suffering in a similar vein. This letter-like story is significant as having been circulated widely on Zarif's page under different posts regardless of Zarif's messages in the posts. The original writer is therefore unknown, but it was circulated by other users as a way of communicating and mediating precarity and injurability - and is thus very similar to the messages that are 'forwarded' on email or social media platforms:

[This is a] a letter from a 26 year old girl to the foreign minister of Iran.

Hello, I hope you are already feeling better, and I also hope you will read my letter thoroughly. I am married; we registered our marriage three years ago but have not been able to have a ceremony because of the financial problems we are

dealing with. My husband is a PhD student and he cannot find a job. Not having money or a job has taken complete vengeance on our life [...] I have recently been accepted onto a Master's degree course but I cannot afford to pay for the transportation. [...] I don't know whether you have children or not, I don't know how you managed to study but please leave all of your privileges aside and imagine studying in the worst possible situation.[...]the only thing that I have received from this life has been pain and regret [...] I am Iranian, why can't I have social services? In my own country which my family have given martyrs for? Why don't I have a job? Why can't I afford healthy food? Why I am poor? Where is this nuclear energy? What has it given to me? Will I get employment in it? Or will my husband? [...]even if it is something good to invest in for our future generations, why should we be sacrificed for it? Why should the future of the next generation be built on the ashes of ours ? What sin have we committed? [...] in what language should I say this, that I do not want nuclear energy at the expense of my life and youth? I only live once and I want to be happy. I have had enough of feeling sorry for myself and grieving [16 July 2014]

Here the phrase 'in what language should I say this?' comes near to the end of the post, to reinforce the writer's appeal, after an accumulation of questions, many of them rhetorical. Nevertheless, the repeated posing of questions is also a technique to emphasise the message in the replies have I studied. The framework again poses, as in the instances above, a sequence of heteronormative tropes to 'impress' and maximise the emotional intensity associated with the message; this tactic, one can say, seems to have worked, given the circulation and attraction of this post for other users. What is

interesting in this example is that while her story is still framed, as it seems, in a very well-worked heteronormative mode, unlike the other examples in this chapter it gives a modern twist to the narrative of female precarity. This is a contemporary Iranian woman who is both educated and jobless; the story thus mediates vulnerability in a ‘dignified’ way. As we see, she is both a wife and a student, and also seeking work. She situates herself, presumably, within a working class background in that she confesses to Zarif, using intimate and familiar language, that she and her husband are unable to live together in spite of being officially registered, in that they cannot afford to get a flat. The letter is embedded within the contemporary cultural and social particularities of Iran, in that there are mentions of her family as a ‘martyr’ family, referring to the Iran/Iraq war of 1980-88. The mention of the war allows the return of the more general crisis theme, thus strengthening the narrative of precarity in the time of the specific crisis of sanctions.

Letters to Zarif: intimacy as an affective genre

Genres of intimacy and vulnerability may be considered, then as associated with particular stylistic framings that also have generic features. The format of a letter to Zarif, among the comments, is an example of the ways in which the Facebook comments generate certain genres of intimacy. This epistolary genre is characterised by a personal and familiar tone and detailed, intimate content, as in a letter to family or a friend.

It is noticeable in the third comment (of three), in the previous section, how Zarif's back pain, which was widely reported on in social media, was picked up on and related to the pain of the person described in the reply. Here, interestingly, the physical pain that Zarif is going through becomes a register of a pain which is caused by sanctions. Thus it seems that the young woman is narrating this pain as manifesting similarities and intimacy between two people sharing the same suffering. She brings his pain close to hers in an intimate relation, using the rhetorical question form: 'in what language do I need to say to you..?'. Nonetheless, again, it seems she has found a language.⁵⁷

Rhetorically, the implication is that a discourse of mutuality between state and people has become available, whereas under the previous government, there was none. The phrase itself is a common phrase in Farsi; it points to a seemingly unavailable common ground of mediation between parties, an unavailability that has both emotional and

⁵⁷ Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain* (1986), notes that '[p]hysical pain... is language-destroying' (p.19), while psychological suffering has generated hugely creative uses of language. Here, one might say that the woman begins by describing a condition which is ultimately indescribable, then moving onto to more psychological and emotional conditions. But what I want to highlight here is the way in which the condition for voicing all of this pain is that the state is 'listening'.

linguistic dimensions. It suggests a performatively mobilised stress and anxiety about not being able to get one's point across, thus actually making the point ('acknowledge my worry, please listen') quite effectively. The registration of pain and suffering is thus enabled through the construction of an informal, intimate letter.

Many comments invoke, like those above, invoke and reinforce a strong sense of mourning for a loss of ordinary family life, a mourning which can be defined as a genre. This mourning takes place, therefore, within heteronormative limits; it is framed in terms of the home, the table, bread on the table, for example: 'I don't understand a thing about these talks. Where is my drinking water and bread on my table?' (comment on BBC Farsi, 29 November 2014). The men are cast as breadwinners, who are ashamed in front of their families; women, as the shamed national body, may be represented as forced outside the home. Thus the provocation to affect itself is gendered.

Some of the comments, in a fashion which contradicts the majority of comments, but still positioned within an intimate framework, accuse Zarif of 'screwing' the nation, like the rest of the government: they imagine him returning home with 'empty hands'. To bolster their stance, they construct a Zarif who is too privileged to care, as in the example below. This example uses a rather familiar, complaining language at the same time it dramatises Zarif's elite positionality. Thus the presumption of an intimate proximity with Zarif is already positioned within a context of inequality:

Dr Zarif, I swear to God you fucked up. Just look at the society. We are in agony with your negotiations, we don't want nuclear energy, we want a healthy economy and we want business opportunities. Nuclear energy isn't going to fill

my stomach. You and people like you, you are very high up, you don't know about our situation. You don't know anything about the labourer's life. Oh thank you for this situation that you created for us [sarcasm]. Really, this state of hope and thoughtfulness, we wish you well [President Rouhani's election slogan was 'the state of hope and thoughtfulness'] [4 December 2014]

This man's 'agony' and his empty stomach, his bodily suffering, are deployed to situate him as below Zarif and the social class which he is presumed to represent. The language is sarcastic, to convey the depth of his despair and disbelief that something good will emerge: he mocks the campaign promises. In positioning himself as working class, he dramatises his despair precisely by the apparently unbridgeable gap he creates between himself and Zarif, but if the gap is so unbridgeable, why, one might ask, is he commenting here? Again, as with the phrase 'in what language do I need to say to you?' (above) the utterance evokes the impossibility of communication and simultaneously disavows it. The user weaves mockery and despair, employing multiple levels of emotion to convey the message.

Conclusion

Whether for or against Zarif, the significant point is that commentators may collectively create a kind of intimacy from below, where experiences of suffering and pain generate a performative genre of ‘bare life’ (Agamben, 1998), that give one the authority to pronounce upon who really empathises and who does not – and therefore, who is with ‘us’ or not (we discuss this further in the next chapter). Thus I would tend to agree with Pedwell (2014) that an empathy ‘from the margins’ can critique the alleged empathy of the powerful. But I would disagree with her that such an empathy ‘loses its affective force as soon as it becomes teleological and instrumental’ (Pedwell, 2014, p.190). We have seen that Facebook commentators develop a great affective force around the goal or *telos* of success in the negotiations, and that these same commentators can instrumentally deploy an appeal to empathy, through staging their vulnerability, as they intentionally orient themselves towards an object like Zarif, whom they surface with particular attributes (Ahmed, 2004a). In situating vulnerability in terms of its specificities as discussed above, we can see how the mourning and grieving for the loss of the ordinary, and for the permeation of injurability, have constituted modes of expression which are primarily framed within a bounded, heteronormative and gendered framework. Nonetheless, what is evident is that these performative genres are deployed and reshaped, using highly affective repertoires, in complex, creative and flexible ways.

Chapter Six: Transnational Affect: the politics of grievability

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the affective and emotional modes generated around the ‘necessity’ of imposing sanctions on Iran, through exploring the transnational production of livabilities, the unequal distribution of the conditions of life (Butler, 2004, 2010). Drawing on and developing the notion of affective regimes as a means of recognising and regulating political subjectivities, I seek to analyse the ways in which particular emotionalities tend to delimit and shape political discourses and produce differential distributions of the protection of life. Employing a Butlerian framework in my analysis, I argue that the appearance and repetition of notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the Facebook comments are constructed through and in response to a differentiated transnational politics of grief.

Judith Butler’s concept of grievability is developed in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* ([2009], 2010). She emphasises that social and political norms shape the conditions under which precarious lives are deemed worthy of protection, and determine one’s eligibility to take these sorts of decisions (Butler, 2010, pp.20-21). As she puts it:

specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living. If certain lives do not qualify as lives or are, from the start, not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames, then these lives are never lived nor lost in the full sense. (Butler, 2010, p.1)

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler traces the ways in which grievability is allocated differentially in times of

war and heightened nationalism [when] we imagine that our existence is bound up with others with whom we can find national affinity, who are recognizable to us, and who conform to certain culturally specific notions about what the culturally recognizable human is. This interpretative framework functions by tacitly differentiating between those populations on whom my life and existence depend, and those populations who represent a direct threat to my life and existence.

(Butler, 2010, p.42)

Those populations which represent a threat are thus deemed to be less grievable. Butler makes this observation in the context of the mobilisation of the US population behind the ‘war on terror’, where, she argues, certain ‘other’ populations, mainly Muslim, are framed as less grievable as a matter of state and media policy. Within an analytic structure informed by Butlerian notions of the differential distribution of livability, I argue that Facebook comments generated by Iranians seem to depict their lives to be framed by transnational and local powers as less grievable and more precarious because of sanctions, and/or because of the role played by previous Iranian governments in aggravating or failing to mitigate the effect of those sanctions. It is in relation to these frames of grievability and precarity, I suggest, that Iranian publics position themselves as vulnerable. My framework seeks to highlight these self-conceptualisations, foregrounding assertions of a right to a livable life, as dependent upon distinctions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, which are enabled by the affective-discursive

constitution of vulnerability as formative of the national body. This means understanding the ways in which ‘us’ and ‘them’, as forms through which the vulnerable public is structured, are situated in relation to categories of grievable and non-grievable life, which are deemed by Facebook commentators simultaneously to operate within the borders of the nation, and in a transnational dimension.

By highlighting the transnationality of affect, I seek to conceptualise sanctions not only as foregrounding the production of crisis as affective, but in their relation to what I see as the transnational biopolitics of governmentality. Biopower, the modern form of sovereignty, involving the regulation of populations, is not simply the power to take life or let live, but ‘is the power to make something live or to let it die, the power to regularise life, the authority to force living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways’ (Berlant, 2011, p.97, following Foucault, 1998).

I argue here that sanctions have been operationalised transnationally as *affective regime* through the ways in which these affects have been distributed unequally. In particular, I first note the unequal distribution of trust in relation to Iran internationally, which is related to the withholding of empathy, as is apparent from political speeches, documents of international bodies, and Western media reports. As I have noted in previous chapters, the feeling that empathy has been denied is very frequently articulated on Farsi social media.

In relation to the ‘global powers’, or the ‘P5+1’ as they are called in Iran and in worldwide reporting on the sanctions negotiations, I aim to identify and delineate two affective axes of biopower in relation to sanctions, firstly, that which I call the regime of counter-compassion or counter-empathy, and secondly, interwoven with and dependent

on the first, a regime of trust – or rather, distrust. I will draw here on Pedwell’s work on empathy as affective regime (2014) to complement the utilisation of Butler’s work on regimes of grievability (2004, 2010) and Ahmed’s on suspicion and trust (2004a, 2014). What I will explore here are the ways in which, through being cast as inherently untrustworthy, Iran becomes an object that is also undeserving of compassion. Delineating the features of each axis of affective disciplinarity will allow fuller contextualisation of the Facebook comments, as I examine how Iranians posting online seemingly accept, reject or negotiate these representations. I first examine how the withdrawal of empathy and trust must be predicated upon the identification of Iran as exceptional threat.

Iran’s nuclear programme: a singular threat

In this section, I analyse the emotional intensities surrounding the language utilised to refer to Iran and Iranians in their relation to the presumed illegitimacy of the nuclear programme during the imposition of sanctions on Iran. This highly affective discourse, I contend, helps to create a differential distribution of livability which worked through the creation of distinctions between grievable and non-grievable bodies. Through this discourse, certain bodies appeared as more worthy of empathy and hence of protection. In the previous chapters I constructed a framework which foregrounded the language of vulnerability within an emotional national politics in the context of Iran. Nonetheless, as Butler et al. point out, ‘it remains imperative to critically examine the logic of disavowal by which vulnerability becomes projected and distanced from prevailing ideas of agency and mastery’ (2016, pp.4-5). Thus, a discourse of vulnerability can be

affectively marshalled by global military powers (Butler, 2010) in order to produce new configurations of threat and fragility.

In his remarks of 1 July 2010, minutes before signing comprehensive sanctions (CISADA) into law, President Obama placed emphasis on Iran as singular threat, thus casting the rest of the world as hypervulnerable. This singling out of Iran is a major part of ‘the political grammar’ of sanctions (see Hemmings, 2011), and a point of entry into the discussion about the production and construction of Iran as exception:

[...] Now, in the entire world, there is only one signatory to the NPT [Nuclear Proliferation Treaty] - only one - that has been unable to convince the International Atomic Energy Agency that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. One nation. And that nation is Iran.... Finally, even as we increase pressure on the Iranian government, we’re sending an unmistakable message that the United States stands with the Iranian people as they seek to exercise their universal rights. This legislation imposes sanctions on individuals who commit serious human rights abuses. And it exempts from our trade embargo technologies that allow the Iranian people to access information and communicate freely. In Iran and around the world, the United States of America will continue to stand with those who seek justice and progress and the human rights and dignity of all people. (White House, 2010)

Here the discourses of singling out and of universalism work together to underline the role of US good intentions towards ‘all people’. The depiction of the world as highly vulnerable and exposed is required here in order to legitimate the making of an

exception, the Iranian state. What I suggest here is that there is a link between exception-making and this assumed universalism. Jasbir Puar (2007), following Amy Kaplan (2005), argues that America, as an empire which considers itself as incarnating that which is universal and best about human society, already constitutes itself as unique exception, since it arrogates to itself the power of deciding what is universal.

Laying claim to uniqueness (exception = singularity) and universality (exceptional = bequeathing teleological narrative) is not quite as paradoxical as Kaplan insists, for the state of exception is deemed necessary in order to restore, protect, and maintain the status quo, the normative ordering that then allows the United States to hail its purported universality.(Puar, 2007, p.7)

America's exceptionalism renders it immune, in this form of national imaginary, to the fate of other empires, indeed, allows it to disavow being an empire at all. This exceptionalism can, then, be associated with the ability to direct which entities should be excepted from being the beneficiaries of the universal values that it embodies. As the jurist Carl Schmitt proposed, it is the 'sovereign power', in this case the US, which precisely has the ability to determine states of exception, since, by definition, it is the highest source of authority (Agamben, 1998). Thus when Obama positioned Iran as the singular, exceptional entity, the rhetoric was anything but surprising for Iranians: Iran's supposed deviancy is far from novel - it has been a theme in representations of the country since the revolution of 1979. As Butler argues, 'such... conceptual frames are ways of building and destroying populations as objects of knowledge and targets of war' (2010, p.xix).

Concerns about the nuclear programme and human rights have added new layers and complications to the sanctions imposed for sponsorship of terrorism after 1979. The amalgamation of all these issues has been a useful political tactic at key moments in the nuclear negotiations, especially when encapsulated in the word ‘threat’, which has historically accumulated a strong affective excess. In 2015, State Department spokesperson P.J. Crowley was reported as remarking that:

‘They (Iran) are the single biggest threat in the world, they are the single biggest state sponsor of terror, they are exporting their Islamist revolution now to Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen,’ Crowley said. ‘We face a serious and grave threat in Iran now that has been exported to Iraq.’ (Fox News, [20 May] 2015)

Clearly, in these comments, aimed at isolating Iran from the rest of the international community, an entity which is the ‘single biggest threat’ becomes ripe for singling out. It is important to highlight the particular affects that are generated through these statements, which help to create the differential grounds upon which states of exception as opposed to the normative are assigned, and reinforce the hypervulnerability of the rest of the world, confronted by the imagined threat. The reduction of Iran to ‘threat’ helps to concentrate affective intensity around this singular attribution.

I would construe what I see as regimes of counter-empathy and distrust directed toward Iran as the manifestations of a biopolitical regime of *exceptionalism* which goes back some decades - and which does not solely involve Iran. I propose to trace the ways in which certain untrustworthy bodies are oriented as devoid of ‘good intentions’, to use Albright’s phrase below, and are thus excluded from the community of those with good

intentions who work to maintain a fragile consensus. I suggest that while ‘international consensus’, in other words, a purported form of universalism, is invoked in order to prevent the ‘singling out’ of Israel on this question, the unwillingness of international bodies to apply the same standards to both Israel and Iran equally has resulted in a situation in which it is the sovereign power of the West, led by the United States, that determines which nation should be included in the lawful community and which should be excluded from it – in this case, Iran. I further argue that this affective discourse of exceptionalism is grounded upon what I earlier referred to as the possession of the ‘good intentions’ necessary to build the ‘consensus’, that valuable, always-threatened object, which is oriented to as ‘fragile’. Any challenge to this framework is viewed as a challenge to existing regimes of livability.

Thus a certain contradictoriness in international political discourse becomes apparent. A key instance concerns the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) general conference held in Vienna in September 2009, where a non-binding resolution was adopted which expressed concerns about Israeli nuclear capabilities and the paucity of information made available about them, and called upon Israel to adhere to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).⁵⁸ The states backing the resolution were for the most part Arab-majority countries. The resolution eventually fell as the majority of Western countries opposed the ‘singling out of Israel’ as being ‘unfair’. In response to the

⁵⁸ Resolution GC (53)/RES/17, 18 September 2009 (IAEA, 2009). The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the only multilateral treaty and ‘binding commitment’ on the part of nuclear weapon states, is ‘a landmark international treaty whose objective is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and weapons technology’ seeks to advance collaboration exclusively on the basis of the peaceful utilisation of nuclear energy, and it purportedly continues actively to advocate ‘nuclear disarmament and general and complete disarmament’. Iran had, in compliance with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) safeguards, signed the NPT in 1970 during the rule of Mohammed Reza Shah. In total, 191 parties have joined the Treaty, of which five are nuclear weapons states. Israel, Pakistan and India, though possessors of nuclear weaponry, have never signed the treaty. (United Nations, 2017)

resolution, chief Israeli delegate David Danieli stated to the chamber that they would not cooperate and that the resolution's sole aim was to reinforce 'political hostilities and lines of division in the Middle East region' (Reuters, [18 September] 2009). Canada complained, however, that Israel was being 'unfairly singled out' in the light of Iran's 'lack of co-operation':

Canada abstains on [the] resolution... entitled "The risk of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East." Like resolution GC(53)/RES/17 [*the one referred to above*], Canada believes that it *unfairly singles out* Israel while remaining silent on the numerous examples of non-compliance with non-proliferation obligations by other states in the region. These examples include Iran's lack of cooperation with the IAEA and its failure to comply with UN Security Council resolutions [...] (IAEA, 2010) [my emphasis]

The Canadian response, marked by highly affective language, stated that the existing 'fragile consensus' risked being undermined by the resolution on Israel's nuclear-related activities:

Canada's [government] fully supports the vigorous approach that you have taken to the Iran nuclear issue. The *serious threat* [my emphasis] that Iran's nuclear program poses to regional and international security, and to the integrity of the IAEA safeguards regime in particular, must not go unchallenged. [...] Canada is concerned, in particular, that ongoing efforts to address this highly political issue at the IAEA runs the risk of undermining the *fragile consensus* on the way forward on nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament that was achieved at the

Review Conference. In this context, Canada was also disappointed to see that the issue of Israel's nuclear capabilities was added to the agenda of the June Board of Governors meeting (IAEA, 2010).

Here, the resolution on Israel is associated with the production and generation of particular affects, mediating a sense of disturbance of the ordinary and the normative: fragility (of a consensus), a sense of stability which as it seems is limited; and, as the letter states, questioning Israel's nuclear capabilities is the undermining of a 'fragile' consensus in place. Fragility here is associated with the positive value of 'balance' and principled moderation, a balance which can be upset by the singling out of Israel, but which is not upset by the singling out of Iran. It might be argued that a focus on both nations would indicate that the much valued 'universality' of international consensus is being applied, and would by definition make any 'singling out' impossible. However, Israel's status as a non-signatory to the NPT apparently assures the IAEA's respectful distance, the postponement of any more rigorous inspection that might come with the 'universalisation' of the NPT. Here, then, a 'fragile' and valuable consensus takes the place of any rigorous and universal application of international standards.

In the same fashion, New Zealand, likewise, professed its commitment to the 'universality' of

the Treaty on the Non Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and consistently calls on all states that have yet to do so to immediately join the NPT as non-nuclear-weapon states.[...] (IAEA, 2010)

and opposed the singling out of Israel:

New Zealand opposed the Israeli Nuclear Capabilities resolution in 2009 because it *singled out* Israel as a non-NPT member while ignoring serious concerns about non-compliance by NPT States Party in the Middle East [*Iran*]. It is our understanding that all of the major elements of the resolution as proposed were covered in a *balanced* manner in Resolution GC(53)/RES/16 "Application of IAEA Safeguards in the Middle East". (IAEA, 2010) [my emphases]

This is all stated, again, to be in the interests of 'balance', conflating balance and consensus with universality. The European Union's response was of a similar character. It pointed to the necessity of universalising the treaty, while at the same time noting that there was no consensus around singling out a country such as Israel:

The European Union fully supports the *universalisation* of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and has always been in favour of the establishment of a zone free of WMD and their means of delivery in the Middle East, an objective which is also enshrined in the Barcelona Declaration, which provides an important framework for partnership between the EU and the Mediterranean countries.... With regard to the resolution "Israeli Nuclear Capabilities" (GC(53)/RES/17), adopted by last year's General Conference, I would like to recall that EU Member States voted[vote] against this resolution. The EU continues to be of the view that pursuing the consideration of a *non-consensual*

approach, as manifested by the resolution "Israeli Nuclear Capabilities", will not be conducive to a good atmosphere at the General Conference and could only hamper the ability of the IAEA to contribute positively to the establishment of a WMD free zone in the Middle East. (IAEA, 2010) [my emphases]

As I have previously suggested, one could interpret this to mean that maintenance of current power relations entails prioritising the existing consensus *over* universality, in other words the application of international standards that are equally binding on all nations.⁵⁹

In another attempt to push the issue three years later, Arab states proposed a resolution at a UN nuclear agency meeting concerning Israeli nuclear capabilities which was again rejected (Al Jazeera, [21 September] 2013). The resolution was strongly attacked by the US, stating that the United States viewed the Arab backed resolution to investigate Israeli nuclear activities as an attempt to – yet again - ‘single out Israel for criticism over its assumed nuclear arsenal which would *hurt* diplomatic efforts to ban weapons of mass destruction in the Middle East.’ (Reuters, [17 September] 2013) This happened whilst both Israel and the United States accused Iran of suspicious nuclear activities, something the country denied, the article reports. (Reuters, [17 September] 2013) However, this particular singling out, interestingly, does not breach any ‘fragile’ and valuable consensus; if anything it unites the world against Iran. The ‘threat’ of Iran, to which the response is ‘singling out’, is arguably constructed within a framework

⁵⁹ The resolution was eventually rejected at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) annual conference, with 51 nations voting against, and 46 for, whilst 23 abstained (BBC News, 24 September 2010: IAEA rejects Arab nuclear resolution on Israel; BBC 2010).

determined by sovereign power, which decrees a normal, rightful universality, as against the threatening version of universalism embodied in the Arab resolutions on Israel to international bodies.

These states were, in effect, pointing out Israel's status as exception, and its relation to the (self-excepting) sovereign power:

American exceptionalism feeds off of other exceptionalisms, particularly that of Israel, its close ally in the Middle East. The exceptional national security issues of Israel, and the longterm 'existential' threat it faces because of its sense of being "entangled in a conflict of unparalleled dimensions," for example, proceeds thus: "exceptional vulnerability" results in "exceptional security needs," the risks of which are then alleviated and purportedly conquered by "exceptional counterterrorism technologies. (Puar, 2007, p.7)

It was, however, the principle of universality that was invoked by Western powers in defending Israel; in their view, others, not the West or Israel, were doing the exceptionalising. The 'singling out' of Israel, became the great and overriding concern for those countries which opposed the resolution, given that this would tend to blur the ultimate boundary between those who can be trusted, intimate and proximate and those who cannot – an essential dividing line which has been discussed above. Singling out Israel creates a disturbance within Western sovereign power relations, a projected sense of 'unfairness', which is revealing in that it shows the centrality of singling out as an affective discourse which cannot be determined by those outside the sovereignty, namely, the Arab majority countries and Iran, the countries which drafted the non-

binding resolution on Israel's nuclear capabilities. The affective intensity, the anxiety and stress, mediated through the letters by mainly Western countries in their opposition to bringing Israel under the same spotlight as Iran points to a disturbance the way some bodies orient towards certain affects: there is a risk, deemed unthinkable, of generating the same doubt about Israel as exists concerning about Iran. Bringing Israel into the sphere of political contention, which seems previously to have been reserved for contentious bodies like Iran, seems to signify, for these international actors, a desire to disturb the differential distribution of vulnerability, in Judith Butler's terms (2010, 2016). Hence it also signifies the contestation of already established regimes of livability and grievability. I now turn to the utilisation of empathy as a mode of demarcating and differentiating Iranian bodies.

Regimes of empathy

During a United States congressional hearing in July 2009, the House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman referred to the ever-encroaching measures of sanctions as ‘a sword of Damocles over the Iranians’, thus presenting ‘economic sanctions’ as a ‘clear hint of what [would] happen’ if Iran did not effectively engage with international bodies, show seriousness, and succeed in gaining the trust needed for its pursuit of a peaceful nuclear program (Delforouh, 2009; Dabashi, 2011, p.136).

Eleven months later, on 1 July 2010, Barack Obama, icon of a hopeful and a compassionate politics, gratefully signed into law further sanctioning measures that he defined as the ‘most comprehensive to date’ against Iran’s ‘desire’ and ‘ambition’ to develop its nuclear plans (White House, 2010). The Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA), already mentioned above, saw the escalation of pressure on Iran rise to its highest level (United States Congress, 2010). It was, by the administration’s own admission, the harshest measure that the US has ever imposed on Iran. As Obama’s Deputy National Security Advisor expressed it two years later, in the wake of further presidential executive orders tightening sanctions:

We have put in place crippling sanctions on the Iranian government. We have thrown the book at the Iranian government in terms of leaving no stone unturned in the sanctions regime. (White House, 2012) ⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Ben Rhodes, during the White House On-the-Record Conference Call on Iran Sanctions, 31 July, 2012.

Sanctions, which are here performatively presented as disabling and hence bodily, were also to exercise their material effects on Iranian bodies. The sanctions measures were in fact very similar in their intended effects to those which were imposed on Iraq in the 1990s (Gordon, 2010, 2013).⁶¹ This nevertheless did not prevent Obama from feeling ‘pleased’ or from thanking both his Democratic and Republican colleagues for their efforts and their ‘good work’ - an interesting phrase, which was followed by applause:

I’m pleased to sign into law the toughest sanctions against Iran ever passed by the United States Congress - the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act. (Applause.) I want to thank all the members of Congress who worked on behalf of this legislation, including another tireless person, but who never seems to break a sweat -- the Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi. [...] And I want to thank those who led the effort to forge a final bill that received overwhelming bipartisan support - Senator Chris Dodd and Representative Howard Berman. Thank you for your good work.

(Applause.) (White House, 2010)

Through this speech, Obama, the man whose ‘sense of empathy’ is ‘a guidepost to his politics’ (Obama, 2007, pp.66-7) contributes to a warmly bipartisan affective atmosphere, while at the same time putting the seal on measures which will adversely affect the lives of most of a population. Empathy, in this context, I argue, may be

⁶¹ The 1990s U.N. sanctions on Iraq led to deaths on such a scale, that the U.N. ‘had to amend and to size down sanctions’ scope of implementations in order to lesser their inhuman effects’ (Gordon, 2013, p. 973). Gordon argues that even though one might assume this to be true also of the U.N. Security Council imposed sanctions on Iran, nevertheless, the resolutions passed by the Council ‘contain ambiguous terms’ which, she contends, authorize ‘much more extensive sanctions imposed by the European Union and others’ which in turn ‘have caused significant harm to the Iranian population as a whole, very much like the measures imposed on Iraq in the 1990s’ (ibid.).

bestowed by the United States upon deserving bodies, but withheld from others, in a way that is shaped by histories of global inequality (Pedwell, 2014; Gunew, 2009). What is intriguing here is that even when withholding empathy, the United States does not give up its position as the subject which empathises and which promises inclusion. In Obama's widely-read words, empathy is 'the Golden Rule – not simply as a call to sympathy or charity, but as something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else's shoes and see through their eyes.' (Obama, 2007, p.66). The very term empathy, even compared to the term compassion and certainly compared to pity, connotes a lack of hierarchy, an inclusion in a universal humanity, which ties in, as others have argued, with an organising myth of the American national imaginary (Kaplan, 2005; Puar, 2007).

The relationship between regimes of trust and regimes of empathy is a critical question for our research into the affective dimensions of sanctions. It appears that both regimes operate through withholding what they promise, and what they promise is inclusion. As Carolyn Pedwell notes, 'Obama calls for empathy that appears to transcend the borders of community and nation'. She quotes his inauguration address of 2009: 'we can no longer afford indifference to suffering outside our borders' (in Pedwell, 2016). As she argues, however, in the face of liberal invocations of a common human condition, 'a critical, transnational politics of empathy needs to pay attention to empathy's *uneven effects*, to the particular social and geo-political distinctions and exclusions the generation of it can produce in a global frame.' (ibid.) In the context of sanctions, I trace here how empathy is mobilised as both a promise of inclusion and as a practice of exclusion.

Carolyn Pedwell (2014) has studied how the emotion of empathy may be operationalised transnationally as a biopolitical regime, drawing on Sara Ahmed's investigations (2004a) of the work done by emotions in the political domain. She endeavours to pinpoint how empathy circulates via 'networks of social and cultural investment' (Pedwell 2014, p.2) and how it 'sticks' to some bodies and not to others. Like Lilie Chouliaraki (2006), she is interested in emotion in relation to techniques of governance, and like her she investigates empathy as a transnational affect, functioning mainly (up to now) to re-cement West-centric racial and gender hierarchies. She thus considers empathy as a biopolitical 'mode of governing that centres on the capacity and potential of individuals and the populations as living resources that may be harnessed and managed by governing regimes' (Ong, 2006, cited in Pedwell, 2014, p.22).

Particularly relevant for this research is Pedwell's analysis of empathy in American politics, and the way in which, in his rhetoric, Obama deployed empathy alongside 'hope' as an index of American progressiveness and neoliberal individuation. As Pedwell explains

[T]hrough the construction of the nation and the corporation as 'emotional collectivities', individuals are transformed into populations to be governed, in part, through the mobilisation of affective hierarchies.... empathy itself becomes a technology of regulation: it produces subjects and populations and the means to regulate them (Grewal, 2005). That is, in cultivating 'empathy', citizens fuel nationalism by developing a marketable skill which contributes not only to American economic competitiveness but also furnishes articulations of American cultural and ethical exceptionalism (Pedwell, 2014, p.57).

Empathy and hope, which became key components of this governmentality during and after the Obama election campaign of 2008, are characterised by Pedwell as ‘wish-feelings’ which are oriented towards a desirable future, one which the financial crisis of 2007-8 had seemed to obscure or deny. Hence, as she explains, such emotions become powerful resources for political mobilisation. Pedwell traces the ways in which affect is utilised in the construction of a transnational, seemingly universalist narrative, which is actually based upon a particularist narrative of US moral exceptionalism (see also Kaplan, 2005; Puar, 2007). I explore here how this hegemonic narrative is operationalised through its denial of compassion to Iranians under sanctions.

Four months before the enactment of CISADA, State Department spokesman, P.J. Crowley, had emphasised that the U.S did not *intend* to harm the ordinary people of Iran, using the same adjective for sanctions, ‘crippling’, which Obama was to later employ more enthusiastically:

It is not our intent to have crippling sanctions that have ... a significant impact on the Iranian people,[...] Our actual intent is to find ways to pressure the government while protecting the people. (Reuters UK, [25 February] 2010)⁶²

⁶² The image of ‘crippling’ was endemic in the language of the Administration, as in the following ABC News report of a speech by Hillary Clinton to the American Jewish Committee on 14 May 2014: ‘With the help of Congress, the Obama administration imposed some of the most stringent crippling sanctions on top of the international ones... our goal was to put so much financial pressure on Iran’s leaders that they would have no choice but to come back to the negotiating table with a serious offer,’ [Hillary Clinton] said. ‘We went after Iran’s oil industry, banks, and weapons programs, enlisted insurance firms, shipping lines, energy companies, financial institutions and others to cut Iran off from global commerce.’ (Weinberg, 2014)

Here, I note that the performative speech act of ‘intentionality’ implied in the comments should be seen as highly affective, and as working through the differential allocation of grievability (Butler, 2010). I could not help but wonder how the *unintended* here becomes the very core of what later materialises as *the intended*. The unintended here is the suffering of ordinary people, and what is intended involves making the measures an *effective* pressure on the government in question, as a means to force the reversal of its stance towards a disputed object, the nuclear programme. Nevertheless, the very effectivity of the intended here depends upon invoking a sense of fragility and vulnerability that is deposited in and oriented towards *the apparently unintended target*. Thus, here, not having an intention towards making one suffer does not necessarily translate into rejecting or negating suffering. On the contrary, the statement of one’s empathy towards a potential suffering body seems to construct an affective mode whose job is to ensure the intentions are oriented ‘correctly’. Good intentions once established, the blame for the suffering of ordinary people may be cast on their own government:

I hope they [the Iranian government] choose a better path—for the sake of the Iranian people and for the sake of the world. Because there’s no good reason for Iranians to be denied the opportunities enjoyed by people in other countries, just as Iranians deserve the same freedoms and rights as people everywhere.

This is, of course, involves an admission that ordinary people will suffer from their exclusion from this enjoyment of universal opportunities, rights and freedoms, but this admission that bodies will be injured is at the same time a demonstration of global power.

I thus argue, here, that the performance of empathy, including ‘concerns’ over the potential harm caused by sanctions towards the Iranian people, aided and abetted the construction of sanctions in the first place, in that they construct and generate lives as ungrivable: ‘those that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone’ (Butler, 2010, p. xix). In this context, the meaning of the ‘sword of Damocles’ image above becomes clearer – the phrase carries an affective-discursive acknowledgement of an imminently painful futurity for ‘Iranians’, no distinction being made here between people and government. Yet, as the eventual warm, bipartisan welcome for the new measures suggests, this is not the kind of pain whose consequences or implications for ordinary Iranians can be easily acknowledged or mourned, the more so as sanctions’ ‘political grammar’ (Hemmings, 2011) has always already contained an empathetic element.

It seems, then, that without the utilisation of a regime of empathy (Pedwell 2014), the very imposition of sanctions cannot so easily be celebrated. Thus, the celebratory legitimisation of sanctioning measures lies in an affective discourse which sees any mitigating limits as symbolically enacted, once the ‘good intentions’ of the instigators are announced and secured. In the above excerpt from Obama’s speech, *ordinary suffering* does not appear as pertinent to the intentionality of sanctions. Is it simply forgotten within a context where Obama’s thankfulness is oriented to those whose ‘good work’ has ensured the imposition of the toughest sanctions on the bodies and lives of millions? (White House, 2010). I do not think so: it is not that the US government is unaware of causing suffering through its sanctions. A highly affective language is often embedded in politicians’ statements, which conveys a sense of the

fragility of bodies and lives, but here what is significant is that ‘pointing out’ the unwillingness to cause suffering becomes an essential and affective grammar for the announcement of the grand-sanctioning of a nation, of sanctions as a presumed rightful act and simultaneously as that which ensures an empathetic/empathising regime.

In 1996, in response to a question concerning the reported deaths of half a million Iraqi children as a result of UN and US sanctions, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright answered: ‘I think this is a very hard choice, but the price—we think the price is worth it.’⁶³ In 2000, in an article on the effects of sanctions for a US medical journal, Secretary Albright wrote:

When the United Nations or the United States imposes sanctions against a regime . . . it does not intend to create unnecessary hardships for innocent people, especially children and infants. Good intentions, however, do not automatically translate into good results (Albright, 2000).

It is precisely, I argue, the ‘good intentions’, as manifesting sanctions as affective regime, which also seemingly are allowed to compensate for the ‘unnecessary hardships’ that they entail. The notion of ‘unnecessary hardship’ divides hardships to two parts, forms of suffering that are respectively desired and necessary and those that unwished for and unnecessary – yet at the same time these forms are intertwined, out of necessity. The unwished-for pain can occur at any time but, as suggested above, this should not be allowed to throw doubt onto either the good and just intention behind the

⁶³ Lesley Stahl interview, *60 Minutes*, CBS, 5 December 1996, cited in Mahajan (2001). As Mahajan points out, this estimate of deaths was at the higher end, but Albright did not deny it. An August 1999 UNICEF report later gave some credence to the earlier figure, estimating that about 500,000 Iraqi children under 5 had died as a result of sanctions.

sanctions or the desirability of some of the suffering caused. These embedded and intertwined notions of suffering also come into play in the case of Iran. Empathy is, in a sense, organised temporally: the intention is not to make one suffer, and the initial prospect may be distressing, yet as the vulnerabilities of bodies surface, empathy is not fully operationalised. As it appears, ungrievable lives in this framework are ‘ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed’ (Butler, 2010, p.xix).

I now turn to Obama’s greetings to the Iranian people at the Iranian New Year (Nowrouz), which, I argue mark a significant transnational implementation of this regime of empathy. These greetings, filmed and published by the White House, were part of Obama’s yearly ritual of sending a Nowrouz message to the Iranian people. This I see as one of the many routes Obama took to mark his presidency as more transnationally caring, acknowledging and as one might expect from the author of *The of Hope* (2007), more empathetic: ‘the investment in him as a figure of hope ... stretched far beyond the borders of the United States’ (Coleman and Ferreday, 2010, cited in Pedwell, 2014, p.63):

[...]Now is the time for the Iranian government to take immediate and meaningful steps to reduce tensions and work toward an enduring, long-term settlement of the nuclear issue. Finding a solution will be no easy task. But if we can, the Iranian people will begin to see the benefits of greater trade and ties with other nations, including the United States. Whereas if the Iranian government continues down its current path, it will only further isolate Iran. This is the choice now before Iran’s leaders. [...] As you gather with family and friends this Nowruz, many of

you will turn to the poet Hafez who wrote: ‘Plant the tree of friendship that bears the fruit of fulfilment; uproot the *sapling of enmity* that bears *endless suffering*.’ (White House, [18 March] 2013) [my emphases]

Here, the display of a presumably universal empathy intensifies the threat of isolation, which is wrapped up, informatively yet sentimentally, in a morally-oriented poem with intimate associations of family gatherings. Obama’s chosen poem, read as threatening ‘endless suffering’ is a direct conventional response to one’s non-obedience of the established rules of friendship. Through a highly charged affective language, using one of the most celebrated and familiar of this Iranian poet’s lines, Obama’s Nowrouz message becomes a revealing example of the affective legitimacy of suffering bestowed on supposedly illegitimate Iranian bodies. More remarkably, the threat posed here evokes an organic and local connectedness between the punishment and the guilt through the imagery of roots, trees and fruits. It thus plays down the role of the world’s sovereign powers in imposing sanctions and determining the rightful punishment; the threat is inscribed as *from within*. After all, since the seventh century, Hafez⁶⁴ has been the most popular poet in Farsi, whose poems are read and interpreted as a form of a morally charged fortune-telling which advises people ahead of life decisions, helping them to choose between the good and the bad, righteousness and wrongdoing. The quotation concerning ‘endless suffering’ seems designed to make suffering historically, spatially and temporally a familiar and intimate term. Suffering thus is oriented - to use Ahmed’s term (2004a) - justly towards Iran, as that which arises from within the

⁶⁴ Hafez’ book of poetry has the greatest cultural and social status after the Quran for Iranians and can be found in most Iranian households. According to a longstanding tradition, Iranians consult this book when they have to make a hard decision. They open it up in the middle and reading the first poem on the right page, interpret it as though it were an oracle of wisdom, telling them what the best course of action would be.

country as a result of wrongdoing, in this case, meaning its insistence on planting trees of enmity. The intimacy and proximity of such a threat is the very opposite of the intimacy and proximity accorded to the rightful objects of compassion.

Nevertheless, to untangle the multiple layers embedded in Obama's message is to open up the very foundational basis of this project. By unravelling 'the epistemological problem of framing', defined as frames 'through which we apprehend or fail to apprehend the lives of others as injured, lost' (Butler, 2010, p.1) one can hope to expose how such frames work. Indeed, I would argue that here we see an affective regime in operation which carefully distinguishes the levels of grievability and livability that underpin lives judged to be worthy within its epistemological and ethical frame. Within this frame, the promise of inclusion which is withheld is part of the regime itself.

In the above message, the notion of suffering, through using a Farsi poem, seems to have been turned into an affective-political asset, a constructive means for *transmitting* a strong sense of disappointment to Iranians about their government's behaviour, alongside an expectation of subsequent punishments and their normativity, as that which should be habitually expected. I would call this particular, but also peculiar, form an affectively subverted counter-empathy or counter-compassion. The proposed suffering and its extension into the future is marked as a just and deserved suffering for a cause that legitimises the very implantation of pain in others. It is the compassion of one who is ready to feel empathy towards the object whom they are causing to suffer. This form of counter-compassion I would define as built upon a kind of suffering that is deemed necessary for a greater reason: building security in the world, against a *threat* - a point we turn to in the last two sections of this chapter.

Iran in the world: an empathy denied

In Chapter Four, I examined the denial of empathy in relation to the *Delvapassan* wing of the conservatives, and the creation of the ‘compassionate state’. I now explore Iranian self-conceptions during sanctions in relation to external powers. There is a sense in which, I suggest, empathy is felt to have been denied, not just by *Delvapassan* (conservatives), but by the outside world. Only in this way, as I discuss below, can we understand the feelings of shame, humiliation and anger in the Facebook comments directed at President Obama, Israel, the BBC, and so on, which I analyse in the later sections of this chapter. This, in turn, helps explain the emergence of the vulnerable public as a form of self-grieving and self-empathy, or what I call the political mobilisation of vulnerability.

The following excerpt is from a comments stream from a story published by BBC Farsi in the final weeks of the sanctions negotiations, about US Secretary of State John Kerry and chief Iranian negotiator Javad Zarif sharing a joke. Reactions cover a spectrum of pity for fellow Iranians, outrage and cynicism, but more importantly, we can see the distinctions made within these affective reactions:

- People have died and they’re sitting at the table having fun
- The poor people
- Vultures [happily] flying over the dead body of Iran
- By the time these people reach us, our corpses will stink and our generation will be long gone.

- We're dying of hunger – why don't they get off their lazy asses?

- We are the slaves, they're the kings

- People are dying of their own stupidity, not from hunger

[Mehdi Parpanchi page, BBC Farsi, 29 March 2015]

All those involved in the sanctions negotiations are cast as 'vultures', or as 'kings', while 'we', the nation, are 'slaves'. These 'vultures' prey on 'the dead body of Iran', which is thought of as plural both in the first and third person: 'people have died', 'our corpses will stink', 'we're dying of hunger'. Vulnerability is thus deployed to create a stark differentiation between 'us' and 'them', through a chorally intensified affective accumulation. Even the single dissenting comment marshals this intensity, while re-orienting it.⁶⁵ Here, the consecutive comments, albeit individually brief, collectively articulate a rather coherent and many-sided sense of pain, anger and frustration. There is often an extra edge of anger (or self-flagellation) in the comments posted on the BBC Farsi page, given the BBC's position as foreign and Western institution, connected with the 'old colonial power'. In the constitution of sanctions as *crisis* in the national imaginary, where this crisis is perceived to threaten the survivability of individual citizens and the nation, it is thus possible to trace how blame, rage, contempt, and recrimination may attach to those deemed responsible, that vulnerable publics constitute themselves not only *as*, but *against*.

In November 2014, a year of continued frustration over sanctions, and faced with the familiar impasse, one commentator adopts a familiar depressive or passive position,

⁶⁵As so often, it only takes one comment to disturb the fragile unanimity temporarily achieved in this space of contestation – Iranians are 'dying of their own stupidity, not from hunger' - but such self-differentiations only assist in constructing the sense of a public engaged in political contestation.

where (in a way that is similar to comments cited in the previous chapter) the gist of his utterance is that utterances are useless, when no hope is forthcoming from either side:

What should we really say? On the one hand, our government isn't making any progress with the talks, and on the other hand, the foreigners show no interest in reaching an agreement. We have no path forwards or backwards. We have to wait, just to see what will happen.

[BBC Farsi, 24 November 2014]

At a time when the negotiations have become yet another entertainment for the Iranian regime and when the six countries are also complicit in this, the only thing that they don't pay any attention to is the fate and life of a nation which every day gets more involved in financial crisis, psychological disorders and individual and familial disorders. Freeing ourselves from the imposed restrictions of these murderers whose way of dealing with such a crucial subject is to mock or play with it is the only option. [Zarif Facebook page, 17 July 2014]

Go to hell IAEA [International Atomic Energy Agency], they are all puppets. We have become poor and hopeless, we are being drowned in despair and misery, our lives are wasted, talents perish and now IAEA inspectors saying we are not coming to visit? then tell them to go and fuck themselves! [Zarif Facebook page, 17 July 2014]

This is a world, as portrayed in the comments, where populations are devoid of protection and empathy, and there is an anxiety around sanctions remaining as ill-

defined ‘situation’, extended crisis, rather than being resolved as ‘event’ (Berlant, 2011). Zarif’s presence and positionality, in this context, as maker of the ‘compassionate state’ is frequently deemed to be reassuring.

May the Almighty protect the most wise Iranian foreign minister who knows well both the East and the West; may God take away the shadow of sanctions from our victimised and abused nation. Dear Doctor, please also know this, that there is a nation behind you which is also supportive of you in the political arena. So then go ahead with the backing of the nation and our vote. [Female, Javad Zarif Facebook page, 3 July 2014]

This commentator, via, the figure of Zarif, evokes the possibility of disturbing the global and local regimes of representation of Iran, which have systematically constructed Iran as that which deserve sanctions for its alleged ‘enmity’ arising from within, or which (as has already been discussed in relation to the Ahmadinejad government, discussed in Chapter Four) can withstand sanctions without any discernible effect. It is noticeable that this user supports Zarif not only internationally, but also in internal politics, with her vote, against the conservatives.

Zarif seems to have been accorded a higher status than other Iranian politicians specifically for his presumed abilities to modify and possibly make ‘room for manoeuvre’ for Iranians by relaxing the regime of sanctions:

Bring back the nation’s pride. [Zarif’s Facebook page, 5 December 2014]

The final agreement with the West is not as important as the fact that you have changed the image of Iran in the world. [Zarif's Facebook page, 5 December 2014]

This is not an easy job for the foreign affairs minister of a country which has relentlessly and consistently been identified and associated with evil in world politics. His success lies in bringing in a critique of the West which goes beyond the often insensitive, blunt, confrontational and provocative 'anti-Western' propaganda of Iran's establishment (for example, Ahmadinejad's call in 2005 to 'wipe' Israel 'off the map', which presumably was meant as a response to Israel's perceived aim of wiping Palestine off the map, contributed to Western pressure on Iran). Hence, the perceived similarity and commonality between Zarif and his Western counterparts are of high significance. Similarities are described in various modes, from his appearance, for example not having the 'proper' beard, which would normally be adopted as one of the unspoken requirements of a presentable official diplomat of the Iranian state, to his diplomatic skills which, as the comment above suggests, resemble those of his foreign interlocutors and his fluency in English. He is said in the comments to be the one who 'knows well both the East and the West' (see comment above), to be just and fair to behave like 'one of them', referring to his fellow American and European negotiators. Zarif's presumed ability to inhabit a combined and imbricated space of 'us' and 'them' seem to have also been rooted in his ability to utilise an 'acceptable' and 'universal' language of the West rather than the 'ideological' and 'undiplomatic' language of previous negotiators during Ahmadinejad's presidency, which has made him a plausible marker of a 'hope' to 'disturb' (Chambers, 1991) the unity of the Western interpretations of Iran as discussed in this chapter.

Regimes of trust

This regime of empathy, or counter-empathy, works through a securitised discourse which orients the object of empathy as proximate, even as intimate (Ahmed, 2014), With intimacy comes, or should come, trust. Trust as affective sign value, to use Ahmed's terminology, 'sticks' to the trustworthy object (2014). Yet Iran is oriented as suspicious object, I argue, through a regime of (dis)trust. Trust is manifested as a property which is reserved and kept for the rightful subjects and proximate bodies (the West and its allies). There must be an embedded directionality which bestows properties of trust, intimacy and proximity on some and not others:

For Iranians, enrichment isn't politics - it's an article of faith, it's part of the national psyche. Telling people here they can't do it is futile. Plainly the only game in town is how it will happen and how to ensure it is for power and medicine and not bombs. That's where the new president has to step up and make good on all this talk of 'engagement' and 'transparency'. Trust would be great but so would a lifelong timeshare in Nirvana - it ain't gonna happen. This is a president who tells other countries not to interfere in Syria whilst his proxy army - Hezbollah - is fighting there daily. So forget trust. It's reality, practicality and proper, intrusive inspection that the Iranians have to concede (Thomson, [8 August] 2013).

The sarcasm - 'a lifelong timeshare in Nirvana' – embedded in this British *Channel Four News* report deprives Iran of the prospect of intimacy and hence of trust. Iran

cannot possess such an attribute, given that its transference is contingent on obtaining the proximity of rightful bodies, those which *can* ordinarily be trusted. News stories warn ‘us’ against forgetting the significance of such proximity. Even after concluding the Iran nuclear deal, Obama stated: ‘this deal is not built on trust. It is built on verification’ (White House, [14 July] 2015). Hillary Clinton was blunter: if elected president, she was reported as saying on 9 September 2015, her approach would be ‘distrust and verify’ (Galston, 2015; Swaim, 2016).⁶⁶

I argue, then, that a regime of trust participates in the same uneven affective allocation as that of a regime of empathy (Pedwell, 2014, 2016). Concerning love (a ‘sticky’ emotion, like trust), Sara Ahmed asks: ‘does multicultural love work to expand love to include others? Or does this expansion require that other others fail an ideal?’ (2014, p.125). In Ahmed’s account of the nation (in her case, Britain) which sees itself as embodying tolerance and universalism, ‘love for difference is also a form of narcissism; a desire to reproduce the national subject through how it incorporates others into itself’ (2014, p.138). One can make similar points, in a transnational context, about the politics of trust and empathy: that this is not about recognising the other, or standing ‘in somebody else’s shoes’, as Obama has phrased it (2007, p.66; see also Pedwell, 2014). The function of these emotions is to incorporate others into a transnational community hegemonised by one nation or at most a few like-minded nations, while ‘other others fail’ the ‘ideal’ (Ahmed, 2014, p.138).

⁶⁶ Both statements are ‘harder’ versions of President Reagan’s catchphrase when negotiating a nuclear deal with the Soviet Union in 1986: ‘trust, but verify’.

As a number of scholars argue, the determination of objects as inherently either suspicious or trustworthy is shaped by racialised histories (Ahmed, 2014; Leys, 2011; Gunew, 2009). Thus, as Ahmed argues, it is necessary to construct genealogies of an emotion such as trust, in order to analyse ‘what we tend to feel is without a history’ (Foucault, 1999, cited in Ahmed, 2014, p.214). Yet what tends to be foregrounded in mainstream political analysis are the ways in which Iran has continuously provoked its very construction as suspicious object.

Thus, in 2013, in what were still the early stages of the sanctions negotiations, an article by Kaveh Waddell appeared in *The Atlantic* on 30 September which evoked a layered history of Iranian untrustworthiness over different issues, paralleled at each stage by the imposition of more sanctions. In the face of this history, the article suggested, earning sufficient trust for sanctions to be lifted might be impossible:

To gain relief from sanctions aimed at Iran’s support of terrorism, its nuclear program, and its human rights violations, Iran would have to undertake enormous reforms across the board. The Iranian government would have to prove that it has not supported terrorism in the past six months; it would have to release unconditionally all political prisoners in the country, end its human rights violations, and establish an independent judiciary; and it would have to assure the world that its nuclear program is designed only to provide peaceful nuclear energy. These are not changes that anybody expects to see in the short term from the current Iranian government, if ever (Waddell, 2013).

This history is presented not simply as composed of Iranian actions which each time provoke another response, but as a sedimented affective weight of mistrust, such that *'peeling back* [my emphasis] each punitive measure would be a long and involved process.' The main source for this article, a piece written on 5 August that year by Ali Vaez (2013), uses the imagery of 'waves' of sanctions, which in turn become 'layers', to convey the remorseless continuity of the process. In peeling back the layers of sanctions from the crippled Iranian body, then, one would also be peeling back layers of negative affect, which in Ahmed's terms 'surface' and construct Iran as a distinct body (Ahmed, 2014).

In my argument, such emotional arrangements unavoidably become part of the way Iranians imagine themselves, as evidenced on Facebook. Intimacy, I argue, becomes what Iran as a collective body is denied access to and simultaneously what subsequently affects Iranians both individually and collectively as isolated and distanced beings who lack proximity to the legitimate bodies (see Ahmed, 2014). Through the desire to isolate the country from the rest of the world, Iran becomes an embodiment of Iranians; it is equated with a coherent and collective body of Iranians. Through the circulation of such news, 'hard times' and 'crippling' disability as forms of punishment imposed on transgressive bodies are subsequently 'felt' by Iranians at 'home' and in the diaspora (see, for instance: Guardian, 2013; Torbati, 2013; Al-Arabiya, 2013).

The politics of livability: the interplay of affective regimes on Facebook

In turning again to analysis of the Facebook data, I interpret comments and comment streams in terms of specific forms of subject-position which are produced by the interplay of the global affective regime of (counter) empathy and (dis)trust with local regimes of the ‘compassionate state’ and *Delvappasan*. I thus explore how subjects position themselves as vulnerable in relation to both/either global and/or local powers, and how they see the livability and grievability of their lives as either confirmed or disconfirmed.

What I notice in the exchanges below is that the anger of a vulnerable public at being injured and humiliated, at being denied compassion, introduces an volatility and unpredictability into the discourse at times which tends to work against the operations of conventional politics, both foreign and domestic. Thus, amid the friendly stream of comments on a post by Zarif after the interim sanctions agreement in November 2013, there are indications that the Rouhani administration is benefiting from being seen a third political force, distinct from both conservatives and foreign powers:

- Keyhan [a conservative paper] ⁶⁷ and Israel, accept our condolences! [it reads in the form of a slogan] [1.7 k likes, 24 November, 2013 at 7:29 pm]

[Replies]

⁶⁷ *Keyhan* is considered to be high-end hardline conservative newspaper in Iran; whilst its readership has remained low, nevertheless it has a high profile, mainly for their consistently provocative writings against the Reformists, which started after the announcement of Mohamad Khatami’s candidature for the presidency in 1997. Over the years, their opposing of the Reformists faction as part of the established politics one the one hand, and their rejection of more moderate and ‘modern’ ideas of social, political or cultural change have created constant topics of criticism and anxiety. During the negotiations they voiced their suspicion of the West, and unlike the ordinary public, ‘mourn’ the deal. They are also included in the label *Delvappasan* (‘worriers’) which I have explained else where in this chapter.

- From the [number of] likes you received, it seems that pals here well-understand the relationship between Keyhan and Israel! [smile emoji] [4 likes, 25 November 2013, 5:55 pm]
- Condolences to Keyhan, Israel, Saudi and Turkey. And again condolences to Keyhan, and lastly, condolences to all of the war-mongers both from within and without, whose bread became rich and oily [with profits from sanctions-busting]

Here, the politics represented by Zarif seem to interrupt the old binary antagonism between conservatives and foreigners, in which there was scant compassion on either side, and create a new binarism between the empathetic ‘us’ and those who do not empathise with people’s suffering. The usual categories of *Eslah Talaban* (Reformists) and *Mohafezeh Karan* (Principalists or conservatives) do not seem to apply here any longer. It is, seemingly, the mode of compassion and empathy, associated with Zarif, which can form and generate support and make sense of the immediate politics at hand. Yet this new ‘us’/‘them’ distinction also generates a distinctive anger and contempt towards those inside and outside the country who would frustrate the agreement.

In the following thread of comments responding to a re-posting of a news story, carried by mainstream Western news agencies, and translated for BBC Farsi, ‘Negotiations end without a deal’ (24 November 14), the individuals making the comments all identify as a ‘we’ which has been injured, perhaps fatally. Other than that, it appears from the comments, there is little agreement about what this ‘we’ is. As I previously mentioned in the methodology chapter, the replies and comments do not always make pertinent connection with the original post published on Mehdi Parpanchi’s BBC Farsi Facebook

page. Highlighting the injurability of the nation, using a range of highly affective language, was the most recurrent mode of response:

A: We are a burnt generation

B: We're dying: how much longer should we wait?

C: We're a nation in limbo

D: We don't want another Turkmenchay [treaty of 1828 whereby Persian Empire ceded a large amount of territory to Russian Empire]

E: We don't want to become another North Korea either

F: We're a generation between arriving and never arriving

G: We want to be looked at as human, not as savages

[BBC Farsi, 24 November 2014, in reply to news item 'Negotiations end without a deal']

The cascading comments offer repetition, yet with significant variation and individuation. The urge to collective self-definition, and its simultaneous frustration, is shown by the way in which the stronger statements about this 'we' mostly involve a negative – not the path of national humiliation (Turkmenchay), not the path of outlaw defiance (North Korea) – or else a positive that is strongly negative ('burnt', 'dying'). The only certainty is suffering, in the unbearably extended present of crisis. If we take the comment of G, however, all self-definition seems finally to be dependent on an orientation towards the 'other'. Uncertainty about the 'self' is understood to be based on the 'other's' certainty that one exists outside the category of human, that one bears the label of 'savage' affixed to one's body. The results in the news story have not found their genre of national imaginary, to use Berlant's terminology again (2011). In the

absence of such a narrative, the only coherent image of the nation is an unacceptable one, produced from outside. But the price of an acceptable coherence, being recognised as human, could be humiliation. Here, the two affective regimes, domestic and foreign, combine to produce the sense of being in limbo. Compassion and recognition is withheld by the foreigner, while at the same time the national level offers little grounding.

Obama on Iranian Facebook

In March 2015, BBC Farsi carried the story that President Obama was noting lack of movement on the Iranian side. Reactions on the BBC Farsi Facebook page show rising tension as the talks reached the decisive point of either success or failure. Many seem to feel that Iran had conceded too much, others that the talks should finish one way or another, either in an agreement, or in war. I have quoted a stream of comments which make reference to each other as well as to the story:

22 March 2015, BBC Farsi

Obama: Iran yet to agree on essential points

(5330 likes 21 hours after publication, 76 shares)

‘US president Barack Obama says during these talks, Iran hasn't yet agreed upon the essential points that are needed in order to reach an agreement.’

Comments:

- Iran has become the punchbag in these 5+1 negotiations. Where is the referee?

[29 likes, 22 March 2015]

- Down with America, Long live the Islamic Republic of Iran [22 March 2015, 10 likes]
- Shut the fuck up [22 March 2015, 3 likes]
- [reply] you shut up, traitor [22 March 2015, 3 likes]
- Damn you for having this attitude. So long as we're chanting these slogans, the situation will remain the same. [22 March 2015]
- I'm won't reply to traitors, even if you insult me for one hundred years. [22 March 2015]
- [Female] – Eat shit, you Chinese and Russian fatherfucker [22 March 2015]
- Please, until an agreement is reached, don't say a word. You fucking [exhaust us to death] not translated yet] [22 March 2015]
- [Female] - Come on. The one who's exhausting everyone [the world] is actually us [Iran]
- This is bullying. [*harfezoor*] First you're telling Iran to sign and then you expect it to be committed to it. Then after all this, you have to see whether you want to get rid of sanctions. What were you thinking [about us]? [20 likes]
- We can't trust America [16 likes]
- I am tired of following the news. Whenever the war is announced, let us know so I can go and be free of this stupidity. At the end of day, nothing will change for us [ordinary people]. [4 likes]
- [reply] Do you mean a regime change? [17 likes]
- They say all the time that Iran has to take hard decisions but they themselves only take soft decisions. They've walked a lot together, but still they talk about taking another stroll.

- [reply by woman] And there won't be any agreement either. I wish they [P5+1] would put an end to this ridiculous theatre. So long as we have people like Shariatmadari, homemade Netanyahus [hardliners], conservative MPs and Rasayi, there won't be any agreement.
- I think if both sides were thinking of the dangers that lie in not agreeing with one other and finishing the talks without any result, they would stop worrying about the dangers of an agreement.
- [reply to Obama] Of course, with your forceful bullying [*zoorgooi*], you rootless homeless mixed-race barbaric violator [*tajavozgar*], they wouldn't agree.
- [reply] excellent point
- This is bullying [*zoor*]
- Come on, stop teasing us. Sign it.
- He means the recognition of Israel :|
- America is bullying [us]. [*zoor goftan*] We don't accept it.
- Down with this two-legged fox.
- Come on, you fucked the nation. [*Nemoodid baba*]
- I think Obama's patience is wearing out at last.
- Don't forget that they also negotiated with Libya and in the end they got rid of its regime. And now there is an absolute chaos in place of the regime.
- I swear on my life, they're [both] playing with us.
- Come on, you can also compromise a little bit. How much more should we compromise?
- This is over the top. The only thing left for them is to take off their [the negotiators'] underpants.

- America and the West talk as if they own the planet. They've tired us all out. You know what, we don't want negotiations any more, they [the US] should just go for the war option, we're ready.
- The Supreme Leader is right that we cannot trust Obama.
- We hope that one day all countries in the world get equal rights on the international level.
- I swear to God, they fucked us up [*Dahaneman servis kardan*]. We don't want the agreement any longer.
- Don't come to an agreement [sarcastic].
- Come on, you fucked us up.
- This person [Obama] thinks he's talking to stupid people. Of course his masters told him to speak like this, but sorry Obama, this is a negotiation between two powers, and in front of the Islamic power, one should talk politely and sign the right kind of agreement, not the bullying agreement...
- Obama, don't play another game please. I swear to God, they'll take you to Kahrezak [a notorious prison], that'll make you sign it right away.
- I'm sorry, but what else does Barack Obama want Iran to do for him? Does he want Iran to take off his trousers for him????

Firstly, there is a mixing of genres here, the conventional 'objective' news report of the US viewpoint on the negotiations, whereby events with strongly affective/bodily implications are phrased in a 'cool', non-affective language - set against the strongly affective reactions of the Farsi-speaking audience on social media – which are arguably so strong in part because the tone of the reporting, on these events with huge implications for ordinary lives, is so cool. In Lomborg's terms (2011, 2014), there is a

convergence between technological levels of media and the social conventions agreed to be appropriate to these levels. The monologic news report, first formulated in an age of print media, exists in tension with the plethora of Facebook comments which voice anger, frustration, sarcasm, despair, shame, as well as agreement – the institutional in tension with the non-institutional.

The second point is the fluid and ever-changing nature of the identifications in the comments. At first, it seems simple enough – Islamic Iran vs America, plus the ‘traitors’ who side with the US. A third position emerges (as we saw previously with the comment equating *Keyhan* and Israel): those who deplore sloganising – meaning the repetition of Iranian conservative positions - as obstacles to an agreement. An ally of this third position counters the strongly affective ‘traitor’ with an insult (‘fatherfucker’) against those who support Iran’s close relation with China and Russia. Another poster expresses exhaustion with the sloganising, before this sub-thread ends with someone else’s reflection that the whole of Iran (not just the conservatives) is exhausting the entire world.

What we find are constant changes in affective level and tone, while the meaning of words, terms, phrases, subject-positions that at first appears less explicitly is amplified, but also in the process, modified. So feelings of exhaustion, fatigue, frustration could be invoked to reinforce the idea of maintaining patience with the negotiations, or, just afterwards, the notion of going to war. In turn, the comment which says ‘nothing will change for us ordinary people’ and invokes the idea of going to war is countered by another (which receives, relatively, a lot of likes) suggesting that the change that should be engaged with is ‘regime change’. Yet in the midst of these shifts, there are repeated

patterns of identification- thus the polyphony of the first group is muted by the strongly binary identifications of subsequent comments. Associated ideas and terms in the comments can be classified in terms of the referential - how persons or groups are named and identified, and the predicational -what characteristics are attributed to them (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001; KhosraviNik, 2014).

Referential -

AMERICA
Obama
Bully
Impolite
Two-legged fox
Mixed race/ rootless/ homeless/ violator

IRAN
We/Us/I
Punchbag
Supreme Leader (only one)

Predicational

AMERICA/Obama/West
Is bullying
Is teasing
Wants Iran to take off its trousers
Wants the negotiators to take off their underpants
Should be taken to [notorious prison] and tortured to sign agreement
Should compromise a bit
Is losing patience
Wants the recognition of Israel
Cannot be trusted
Talks as if it owns the planet
Ignores the principle of the equality of nations
Takes decisions which are soft [not costly] for their side
Created chaos in Libya

IRAN
Compromises a lot
Has been/is being fucked by the US/Obama
Is pressured to take costly [hard] decisions
Doesn't accept bullying
Is ready for war
Doesn't want an agreement any longer
Has rights which are not respected
Sloganises
Exhausts the world

Two strong axes of affective polarisations are discernible – the clearest being the polarisation between the Iranian nation and America/the West. But there is a second polarisation between those who think Iran is being humiliated and should consider breaking off the negotiations, and those who blame the conservatives for their hardline, dogmatic positions. Strategies of affective intensification are more apparent in the comments than strategies of mitigation (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001). Shame, expressed on one side by the vivid metaphor of male rape, is actually a key emotion deployed on both sides, as is anger, as is exhaustion - these superficially similar affects have different political implications; in Ahmed's terms (2004a; 2006), they orient towards and away from different objects (the US, the nation).

Nonetheless, only one poster, a woman, explicitly sympathises with the non-Iranian government side in the negotiations, which she significantly refers to, not as America or the West, but as the '5+1': this takes the focus - and hence, some affective force - away from the main target of anti-imperialist sentiment. She also counters the Iran/Israel binarisation by saying that Iran has its own hardline 'Netanyahus'. Another poster, as noted, perhaps takes this position implicitly, in stating that Iran has exhausted 'the whole world'. The only other note of difference (unusual in that it avoids blaming one side or the other) is the observation that there are dangers for both sides in not reaching an agreement.

Suspicion of those who would seek to include themselves in these vulnerable publics is rife. In a comment on a story on BBC Farsi on 29 March 2015, with the headline 'Lifting sanctions step by step' a self-identified diasporan ventures to criticise both

the West and the Iranian government, as, indeed, many commentators inside Iran had been doing:

A: They [US and allies] have actually pissed on the country, and as a result the Iranian system will last longer – so what happened to the promises of American human rights?

This opinion, though hardly unfamiliar, attracted many criticisms in response, for example the following, which appears to miss the point:

B: Hey, taghouti [an insulting term for supporters of the ousted Shah], we [inside Iran] should be fucked [as a result of sanctions] because you don't like the government in Iran?

The diasporan responds by affirming that he too is part of the 'we', the vulnerable national community, subject to the gaze of the Other.

A: Hey mate, don't assume we're happy in the West either. Here the Westerners look at you as though you're a murderer and terrorist, because you're Iranian.

However, the commentator's positionality as a diasporan fatally weakens his argument. His failing is to be physically outside the country, not to be among those bodies who collectively suffer, or who at least constitute themselves as vulnerable.

Literally, and symbolically, he cannot recover his ground, to become again a legitimate part of the imagined and imagining national community.

In analysing these comment threads, it is helpful to recall two key points made by Lomborg:

a text is never a pure instance of a genre. Any given blog or online chat is of course a bearer of genre traits and therefore a situated expression of the genre, but local communicative practices also constitute a unique emergent text with idiosyncratic characteristics. (Lomborg, 2011, p.61)

As a consequence of the very direct feedback structure online, genres are likely to be organised in a more ad-hoc way, as the horizons of expectations of the user/producers may be constantly challenged, reproduced and adjusted through interaction with fellow user/producers. (Lomborg, 2011, p.66)

Through the constant and rapid challenges enabled by social media, Lomborg contends, generic limitations are always liable to be transgressed. In our case studies, we find, indeed, that genre conventions are frequently deployed, only for the conventions to be subverted or challenged, as with the example of the subversion of the genre of national shame. Within comment threads, words and phrases are frequently repeated or 'liked', but there is constant contestation, often seemingly provoked by a string of comments all agreeing with each other. Constant modification of meaning through partial repetition is also a feature.

Nonetheless, while bearing this in mind, we can identify several genres associated with the national imaginary in these comments, which usually have binary and binarising characteristics. Vulnerability in its more embodied variants (dying, lack of bread) and discursive variants (humiliation) is overriding. The intertwining of the bodily and the discursive is what gives the genre of vulnerability its impact on the national imaginary as manifested in comments on these Facebook pages.

The genre encompasses the following sub-genres:

- Shame (humiliation, awareness of backwardness)/pride, castigation of self/others for (often racialised) backwardness
- Recognition as human/lack of such recognition
- Impasse/limbo/no past or future.

These sub-genres intersect with and reinforce each other. For example, lack of recognition as human goes with shame and vulnerability, or with a comment that bread is now 800 toman, or with the notion of being stuck, with no way forward or back. Moreover, set phrases and terms will have changing political valences and signify different political orientations in the threads. For example, posters may blame the West for their suffering/shame, or the Iranian government or state, or both, or, sometimes (apparently) neither. The desire for recognition as human, in the three examples given above, can be linked to both anti-government and pro-government stances, as well as to a comment which has no discernible political affiliation.

The operation of affective regimes upon these genres can also be traced. We see that lack of human status or a feeling of shame before the world seems to be linked to a sense that Iranians are unworthy of compassion or pity. We can then indicate the

operation of twin affective regimes in mediated processes of subjectification - that of Western political and media institutions, and that of the Iranian state, in particular, the *Delvapas* wing of the conservatives – in creating the affective mode or genre of vulnerability that is linked to a felt lack of recognition.

Yet through the articulation of this vulnerability, affective and discursive contestation and convergence takes place, such that fluid, ephemeral publics on Facebook threads show signs of coherent forms of identification and differentiation that recur across different sites, news stories and times. These vulnerable publics become, arguably, the marker of a new national imaginary and as such, a new national public.

Conclusion

In terms of ‘internal’ Iranian ‘politics, I have argued that the ‘compassionate state’ is formed discursively as affective counter to the politics of *Delvapas*. These two discourses can be viewed, I further propose, as affective regimes playing upon the population, in complex intertwinement with the regime of affect associated with the global powers. In tracing the effects of this interplay upon political subjectivities, it would be misleading to refer to notions of exogenous or endogenous, inside or outside, especially as many Iranians themselves are located outside the national borders - these affects are, indeed, transnational. But in the configurations of self and other that arise from and in turn shape the operations of these regimes, one can trace the constantly shifting features of the national imaginary. In that sense, one can write of the online ‘performance of transnational nationalism’ (Shakhsari, 2010, p.6). It is crucial, then, to see how affect is made to circulate transnationally through regimes of power, and how these regimes play out through the conceptualisations of self and

other apparent in Facebook comments. The vulnerability of bodies and lives is mediated as the vector both of domination and its negotiation or contestation.

Through vulnerable publics, vulnerability is mobilised as collective attachment in the face of transnational and local affective regimes, which also means being remobilised in interests of a new local affective regime, consonant with the agenda of the Rouhani government, around which the fluid publics of social media to a large extent seem to coalesce as a more unified entity, projecting a more coherent national imaginary.

Conclusion: towards a transnational mediation of affective politics

A few months after Iran and the 'P5+1' had at last reached an agreement which meant some relief of the sanctions on Iran, in exchange for more inspection measures and limits on Iran's nuclear plans, *The Guardian* published a piece entitled 'Sanctions, western misunderstanding and religion: 100 Iranians share their views' (Holmes and Shearlaw, 2016). What immediately struck me was the article's focus on bringing to the fore a collective voice, that of anger, depression and frustration around the accumulated pain and suffering of ordinary citizens; it was a rare attempt to show the suffocating effects of sanctions upon ordinary lives. Placing portrait photographs of women and men in proximity with texts comprised of highly affective, reflections on their lives, and those of friends and relatives, put at risk by the severity of sanctions, the article offered a rather surprising and sharp contrast with previous mainstream coverage. What interested me was not only the relation between such representations and the transnational allocation of affect, but their pertinence to the framework of the thesis. The absence of depictions of citizens' suffering prior to the deal, and then their appearance a few months afterwards, makes one wonder about the relation between regimes of empathy and how ethical frameworks are conditioned by the ways in which bodies are situated in the transnational political sphere.

The thesis sought to understand the ways in which affective regimes construct categories of grievability and non-grievability and thus how lives are differentially produced, in the context of transnational politics. I endeavoured to juxtapose contemporary political subjectivities and the national imaginary in this larger context.

I argued that the lack of both practical and rhetorical discourses of empathy in regard to Iranian sanctions seems to be one of the recurring reasons online users engaged with Javad Zarif's Facebook page. The 'compassionate state', emerging out of the temporal juxtaposition of the sufferer and the one who empathises, was mediated through a promise of reciprocity, which, as we explored in the case study chapters, is inherent in the relation of intimacy (Berlant, 2008a, 2011).

In the case of the *Guardian* news story, as the images and captions show, a certain affective unblocking seems to have created a space for the generation and mediation of empathy for the lives of millions whose livelihoods were shattered, whose families were torn apart, as hundreds of thousands of Iranian young people had to leave Iran. This suggests how certain political preconditions are needed for lives to be 'apprehended as living', or how regimes of affect, as I explored in the case studies, delimit 'the conditions of appearance' of lives (Butler, 2010, p.1). In developing the theoretical and methodological framework of this thesis, I wanted to investigate how 'the "being" of life is itself constituted through selective means', that is, as Butler points out, how lives are given shape through 'the operations of power' (ibid.). In tracing the affective and discursive delimitations of Iranian lives, I have tried to respond to her call to 'make more precise the specific mechanisms of power through which life is produced' (ibid.).

This thesis sought to examine the affective impact of sanctions on the Iranian national imaginary, as materialised on social media. Analysing Facebook comments on two BBC Farsi newsfeeds and the page of the Iranian government minister, Javad Zarif, this project proposed a thematic shift, away from the focus on social movements

which has characterised accounts of Middle Eastern social media in recent years, towards the ways in which ordinary life occurs in the midst of *crisis*. In lieu of a cyber-utopia characterised by rational, deliberative publics, or the heady optimism of the ‘Arab Spring’, my work aimed to trace the affective shape of a layered and extended national crisis, in the wake of the defeat of the 2009 Green movement and the subsequent imposition of sanctions, as citizens expressed their opinions and feelings on the progress of the sanctions negotiations of 2013-15. It argues that these fragmentary comments on selected Facebook pages can be seen as constituting vulnerable publics which produce new alignments of Self and Other, and hence shift the terms in which the national community is imagined.

This thesis sought to develop a framework for understanding the sanctions crisis in relation to the national imaginary, and for discussing affective components of national belonging in a transnational context. Suffering, as I explored throughout, became part of this imaginary, aiding and abetting the generation of forms of belonging, constantly detaching from and attaching to different objects. It is this constant activity of desire that this research illuminates. By utilising a Butlerian framework of livabilities, discussed as the differential framings of lives at risk, combined with a Berlantian focus on the narration of crisis as genre, the research tracked emotional and affective articulations of suffering and vulnerability in terms of particular generic narrative structures. What brings together the formations that are considered in the case study chapters under the respective headings of the compassionate state, vulnerable publics, and transnational regimes of empathy, is an affective space of crisis which is divided, hierarchalised and differentiated. These formations all mediate and reflect on affective aspects of differentially separated bodies. The integrated framework

elaborated in the last three chapters thus permits the analysing of affective language online as highly divided between ‘us’ and ‘them’, enemy and saviour, the one who destroys and the one who rebuilds. The self-other analysis is not conducted for its own sake, but to make sense of these divisions through highlighting the production of differential livabilities and grievabilities as situated within what we discuss as transnational regimes of affect.

I developed a flexible approach, based on discursive affect analysis, in order to elicit key data from my chosen Facebook pages, and to organise and render comprehensible my findings. The material studied was often highly discursive, as well as strongly affective in content. Patterns of affect and emotion were therefore located within a particular understanding of the political moment of the sanctions negotiations of 2013-15, in the process of which my key conceptualisations emerged, which, I argue, correspond to specific affective formations and practices: the compassionate state, vulnerable publics, and transnational regimes of empathy. Crucial to my methodology was the categorisation of these affective formations in terms of genre and sub-genre. In developing methods of classifying the material, I endeavoured to synthesise various approaches to genres of social meaning-making, deriving from media studies, critical discourse analysis and feminist cultural studies. It was not simply a question, then, of identifying forms of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the analysis, but of tracing the emotional-discursive narrative practices that connected commentators’ everyday experiences with their notions of how their lives were shaped and positioned historically and geographically.

In situating this research in close relation to feminist studies, it is the attention of feminist scholars to affect and emotion in its connection to broad issues of power and inequality that I have found most useful. I drew on Sara Ahmed's examinations (2004a, 2014) of the imbrication of emotion in the construction of the raced and gendered politics of inclusion and exclusion, and on Carolyn Pedwell's (2014) explorations of the transnational and inegalitarian politics of affect. Key to their work, and to that of Judith Butler on ideas of the human (2004, 2010), is an investigation of the differential allocation of emotion, whether the emotion in question be compassion, empathy, pity, fear or hatred. Building on these insights, more recent studies have highlighted differential modes of vulnerability (Butler et al, 2016). Yet it is perhaps Lauren Berlant's work on the relation between the personal and the political that I have found most suggestive and evocative (2008a, 2011). Her re-evaluation of the place of intimate attachment, and its genres, in one's experience of the political has stimulated me to critically re-assess those studies of social media which see the affective, in counterposition to rational public deliberation, as either inherently problematic or, alternatively, as emancipatory in its essence.

In discussing the national imaginary, crisis and attachment, I drew upon Berlant's conceptualisations of cruel optimism in order to make sense of the relation between citizens' modes of belonging and suffering and what their coupling 'reveals about national power [in] both its impersonality and its intimacy' (Berlant, 1997, p.1). I reflected on the framework of crisis in its temporal aspect, looking at a period between 2013-15, when negotiations resumed after the election of Hassan Rouhani as the new president. I do not, however, suggest that this national crisis framework is by any means an all-encompassing or comprehensive framework of crisis in post-

revolutionary Iran - it is very much embedded in the configurations of recent years. Framing sanctions as a transnational regime of 'counter-compassion', characterised by the withholding of empathy from deviant Iranian bodies, I explore the Facebook comments on these sites as constitutions of vulnerable publics within and against affective regimes. What these online publics find that they have in common, I propose, is the bodily experience of being Iranians who are prone to injury through living in a common national territory. Instead of the vaunted transnational cosmopolis of cyberspace, it is the national imaginary that is constituted and reiteratively performed online through the invocation of offline suffering. I argue that citizens constructed their own forms of collective self-mourning, which are affective-discursive political articulations. I then track the ways in which, from 2013, under pressure from its citizens, the new Iranian government, proffering the hope of the lifting of sanctions, elaborated an affective regime of compassion through which Iranian bodies were reconfigured as injured and grievable, but the source of their injury was identified as external rather than from within. Thus the reconstitution of the national imaginary, I argue, involved re-attaching to a now 'compassionate' state. This attachment to a new object of feeling entailed mobilising ill-defined and incoherent hopes and longings. The state became a 'compassionate state' so long as people could attach to it as reciprocal. But it is, at present, widely deemed to give people little in return for the trust and intimacy bestowed upon it. Perhaps this shows that in failing to address adequately the cluster of promises and wish-feelings that attached to their government, the reformists either failed to delimit sanctions as exceptional crisis, or succeeded too well in making relief of sanctions the yardstick by which people could judge their achievements and that of the economy.

Through exploring the Facebook comments in order to concretise the terms ‘compassionate state’ and ‘vulnerable public’, it can be seen how the vulnerable public in particular ways foregrounds the compassionate state, which thus enjoys a somewhat privileged distance from both conventional political factions, the Principalists (conservatives) and the Reformists. In reflecting on the ways in which a transnational politics of empathy is reshaping the politics of Iran, one can observe this emerging compassionate state to be more favoured at the expense of other political factions. It appears, however, that the bond between the vulnerable public and the object of their desire, although powerful, is at times fragile and sometimes even the object of brutal scepticism. This recalls Berlant’s observation in *Cruel Optimism* that the intimate public is based around an ‘affective contract’, which involves an assumption and an expectation of reciprocity, that something will be given back in exchange for one’s trust (2011, p.66). The acknowledgement of suffering by the Rouhani government certainly fulfilled one part of the bargain, for a period, yet it remains to be seen whether, if the conditions of ordinary lives do not improve, the Iranian public will come to feel that their initial optimism was ‘cruel’.

I have discussed intimate publics and vulnerable publics as forming around the compassionate state, and in particular, Zarif, as objects of desire that contain clusters of promises. I have frequently drawn on the work of Berlant, and *Cruel Optimism* in particular, in order to theorise these developments (2011). But as we conclude, we need to consider once again the definition of cruel optimism: an attachment to objects of desire and hope which are obstacles to one’s striving. What could that concretely mean, in the context of Iran during and after the sanctions negotiations? We recall, first, that sanctions were defined as a crisis of survivability, as an exceptional form of

precarity. Yet to focus on sanctions as the sole object of concern would be to ignore the way in which sanctions manifested themselves in the framework of the neoliberal economy of increasing inequality – where circumnavigating the trade restrictions imposed through sanctions became a vehicle by which certain individuals could enrich themselves. This research on the affective mediations of sanctions, then, aligns itself with a broader body of scholarship that investigates the global politics and culture of economic precarity. In drawing on the work done by Berlant (2011) on the relation between precarity and intimate publics, and examining its transnational and transcultural implications, this thesis, once again, attempts to show in practice that Middle Eastern case studies do not simply have to be classified under the heading of ‘regional studies’, and that ‘grand theory’ developed and applied in the metropole may not only be applied but further extended and enriched in relation to the global South.

Consideration of sanctions within this wider context of global and domestic forms of neo-liberalism would suggest various ways in which intimate and hopeful attachments to the Rouhani government could ultimately be counterproductive. After all, the administration’s affective discourse of change placed most emphasis, from the first, on acknowledging the pain of sanctions and then on identifying relief from sanctions as ‘solutions’ to, or compensations for, structural problems of economic inequality. But such attachments, at least for a time, tend to bring their own reward, to the extent that, as Berlant points out,

[t]he exhausting repetition of the politically depressed position that seeks repair of what may be constitutively broken can eventually split the activity of

optimism from expectation and demand.(2011, p.227)

That is not to dismiss the intimacy and optimism felt around Zarif, and the hopes placed in the ‘compassionate state’, as simply an ‘illusion’. As Berlant also points out ‘a]midst all of the chaos, crisis, and injustice in front of us, the desire for alternative filters that produce the sense—if not the scene—of a more livable and intimate sociality is another name for the desire for the political’ (2011, p.227).

The problem emerges, as she suggests, when this desire for the political involves repetitively re-attaching to the objects which are themselves the obstacle to constructing a ‘more livable... sociality’. It is not that fantasy or attachment to a future potentiality is unnecessary - but it will be unproductive unless it involves detaching from aspects of the present scene (Berlant, 2011, p.263). How the present (form of the) crisis in the Iranian context will be resolved, no one, of course, knows at present. But one could speculate that if that detachment from the existing order is not achieved, some form of re-attachment to the normative will be accomplished, on the basis of yet another, albeit possibly short-lived, form of cruel optimism.

Further research would investigate the forms that this cruel optimism takes (Berlant, 2011). While my research has focused primarily on objects of desire and their optimistic attachments, that is, to the ways in which the nation imagines itself in attaching to clusters of hopes, I see future research as potentially exploring the aspect of ‘cruelty’ in more depth. In pursuing this avenue of research, I think we need to attend to what we are witnessing now in Iran. I conclude this thesis at a time when there is an unexpected outpouring of protest against austerity across Iran - most notably in deprived, impoverished, small cities. This may suggest that a

‘detachment’, in Berlant’s terms, is taking place, that the ‘cluster of promises’, not only of the reformists, but of the entire republican establishment itself, are increasingly being disbelieved by those who have suffered most from the combination of sanctions and neoliberal austerity. But the current protests unfold the pertinence of the notion of cruel optimism in another sense, in that the protestors are being ridiculed by many Rouhani supporters online as immature, angry, not polite enough, ‘mass-like’, and undereducated. This seems to speak to yet another configuration of self and other at the heart of cruel optimism, and to how compassion and empathy is configured multiply - so that a self-proclaimed reformist may deny acknowledgement to those who are outside their discursive, sense-making frame, in order to maintain an attachment to a narrative - of the state as compassionate - that would otherwise threaten to become unproductive. It would be important to consider how the cluster of promises represented by Rouhani would not have made themselves pertinent to ordinary people, even beyond the ranks of the reformists, had these promises not found a path of mediation.

These are early observations - but in the short to medium term, following this thesis, I wish to extend my analysis of the compassionate state and the affective politics of Iran. The impasse may continue, the extended present may fail to resolve itself into event; the question is: what new genres of affective narrative will be found to make sense of – to impose sense on - this situation?

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