

Heidegger and the affective (un)grounding of politics

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Authors' final draft, 03-2019

To appear in: Christos Hadjioannou (ed.) (2020). *Heidegger on Affect*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

1. Introduction

Heidegger's ontological account of affectivity provides a valuable angle for considering questions of politics.¹ On the one hand, one might take some of what Heidegger wrote on affectivity in the late 1920s and early 1930s – usually couched in the idiom of *Stimmungen* (moods) and *Befindlichkeit* (findingness) – as a foreshadowing of his involvement with Nazi politics, culminating in his time as *Führer-Rektor* of Freiburg University (1933/34). For instance, Heidegger's interpretation of boredom in the lecture course *Basic Concepts of Metaphysics* (1929/30) relates notably to his philosophical and public writings during that phase of his career.

On the other hand, Heidegger's views on affectivity can figure as a starting point for an ontological perspective on the political as such. In particular, his account of *Grundstimmungen* (basic attunements) leads into what arguably is the founding dimension of the political. These encompassing affective conditions reveal the ungroundedness and thus radical contingency of human existence and thereby open an affective path towards the political as the sphere of the ungrounding grounds of politics. The political as such does not refer to politics as a sub-system of society, but to the questioning of the foundations of politics, which turn out to be necessarily “contingent foundations” (Butler 1992). Although Heidegger's own politics – at least in the early 1930s – did not explicitly relate to the affectively disclosed ungroundedness of existence, but rather curtailed this openness and

indeterminacy in an individualistic and decisionistic closure, we argue that Heidegger's view yields to a radically political reading. Not least, this is testified by a significant current of French political thought since the 1960s which heavily draws on Heidegger's *ontological difference* (see Marchart 2007).

Obviously, then, it all depends on how the insight into this ungroundedness is concretely 'processed' and dealt with. In this regard, Heidegger himself can only figure as a bad example and a warning as to how the lack of secure foundations can underwrite a craving for determinacy and authority. Our aim in what follows is to trace this so-called 'post-foundationalist' line of political thought back to its origins in Heidegger's works, especially to Heidegger approach to affectivity, in order to assess the potentials and pitfalls of 'Heidegger on politics'. Along the way, our exploration will yield an outlook on an understanding of what might be called 'political affect'.

The chapter is structured as follows. We begin by outlining the focal role that affectivity – *Befindlichkeit* – plays within the existential analytic. The following in-depth discussions of the *Grundstimmungen* of angst and boredom allow us to elaborate what we take to be key in this account: the affective insight into the radical ungroundedness of existence. We argue that this is, in fact, a paradigmatically political insight. In the throes of these *Grundstimmungen*, no direction, tendency or orientation appears in any way more relevant or meaningful than any other. After a brief interlude on Heidegger's own politics during the *Rektoratszeit*, we will end the chapter with an outlook into a postfoundational account of the political. An encounter with ungroundedness throws us into a radically democratic situation (cf. Lefort 1988) in which all references to fixed foundations are necessarily suspended, and freedom – as the task of plural self-determination under conditions of indeterminacy – comes to the fore as the "*raison d'être* of politics" (Arendt 1961, 146). It is at this very point, or rather: out of this predicament, that Heidegger takes his own fatal turn

toward Nazism. We take this point of juncture in Heidegger's life as a call to reflect on the dangerous ambivalence of the ontological understanding of affectivity.

2. The gist of *Befindlichkeit*

In his lecture course *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger introduces what he calls moods or attunements by way of a rigorous distancing from the psychology of individual 'inner' feelings, and by stressing the ubiquity and pervasiveness of moods as that which sets the stage and prepares the ground for our being and being-with (cf. FCM, § 17):

Attunements are *not side-effects*, but are something which in advance determine our being with one another. It seems as though an attunement is in each case already there, so to speak, like an atmosphere in which we first immerse ourselves in each case and which then attunes us through and through. It does not merely seem so, it is so; and, faced with this fact, we must dismiss the psychology of feelings, experiences and consciousness. It is a matter of *seeing* and *saying* what is happening here. (FCM, 67 [100])²

A few years earlier, and in a more systematic fashion, Heidegger had introduced *Befindlichkeit* (findingness) – his term of art for the dimension of affectivity among the constituents of *dasein* – in division one of *Being and Time* (BT, § 29 & 30) as part of an analysis of the three equiprimordial modes of being-in (*In-sein als solches*). In light of this positioning in the existential analytic, one might gloss findingness initially as something like a 'ground floor' dimension of intentionality: *Befindlichkeit* is the passive-receptive dimension of *Dasein*'s "openness to the world" (BT, 137)³. As such, it prepares and structures the concrete modes of *directedness towards...* characteristic of intentional comportment: "*The mood has already disclosed, in every case, being-in-the-world as a whole, and makes it*

possible first of all to direct oneself toward something.” (BT, 137; italics in original) Few have said it nicer than Katherine Withy, who describes the world-disclosing role of Heideggerian moods as follows: “‘Mood’ is to be understood in a broad and deep sense, as the affective atmosphere that pervades the *mise-en-scène* of human life, through which we are attuned to ourselves and our world in a particular way.” (Withy 2012, 201)⁴

As a constitutive dimension of being-in, findingness is entangled with its other constitutive modes, namely *understanding* and *discourse*. Accordingly, there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ mood; instead, *dasein* is always in a particular existential orientation that combines passive-receptive, active and discursive comportment: “Every understanding has its mood. Every attunement is one in which one understands. [...] The understanding which has its mood [...] articulates itself with relation to its intelligibility in discourse.” (BT, 335).

Yet, when it comes to the role of findingness within the existential analytic, this *de facto* entanglement of attunements with other modalities of being-in is of lesser importance. What matters at this level is the ontological character of findingness, namely, that it discloses *facticity* – the brute ‘*that it is*’ of *dasein*. In moods “*dasein* is brought before its being as ‘there’.” (BT, 134) For the most part manifest in the form of a burden (*Last*), the brute facticity of existence is disclosed – made manifest – by the moods and attunements that make up findingness. “In having a mood, *dasein* is always disclosed moodwise as that entity to which it has been delivered over in its being; and in this way it has been delivered over to the being which, in existing, it has to be.” (BT, 134) Famously, this ‘being delivered over’ is what Heidegger then goes on to call the “thrownness” (*Geworfenheit*) of *dasein*:

This characteristic of *dasein*’s being – this ‘that it is’ – is veiled in its “whence” and “wither”, yet disclosed in itself all the more unveiledly; we call it the “thrownness” of this entity into its “there”; indeed, it is thrown in such a way that, as being-in-the-world, it is the “there”. The expression “thrownness” is meant to suggest the facticity of its being delivered over. (BT, 135)

Most conspicuously in ‘negative’ moods, findingness is the unshakable manifestation of the *burdensome* facticity of one’s own being, i.e. that one has no choice but to *be* here and now as *this* particular entity in this particular (i.e. specifically constrained and limited) worldly setting.

Another important characteristic of *dasein* is that the modes of being-in are constitutively prone to *Verfallen* (falling). What is important to note about falling is that Heidegger takes it to be a pervasive mode of being of *dasein* – it effectively describes the default way in which *dasein* comports itself towards entities in general, how each and everyone ‘is’ for the most part and usually. If this is the case, then a methodological problem arises for the existential analytic: How to get at an allegedly more original structure of *dasein*, how to even assume that there is such a structure, when it is true that the tendency to succumb to blind routine and averageness is so pervasive, even constitutive for everyday *dasein*? Heidegger assumes that certain affective conditions are capable of *counteracting* falling and thereby set *dasein* on the path to potentially deeper existential insights.

Findingness, however, is likewise prone to falling, so that its ontic concretions – particular instances of moods or emotions – will for the most part unfold in characteristically inauthentic forms. When it comes to the modes of *disclosure* transpiring in findingness, these will by and large be forms of an “evasive turning away” (BT, 136). In this way, then, everyday affectivity discloses exactly not by revealing our predicament lucidly; instead, affective disclosure unfolds (at best) indirectly, through thickets of distractions, by inclining to shallow diversions, thereby for the most part occluding or withholding what we are factually up to. Most conspicuous is this tendency with regard to the basic moods *angst* and *boredom* – so much so that we seldom even notice these moods at all for all the distractions and evasions that keep them for the most part in states of latency.

This uncommonness confirms that findingness is an exquisitely *ontological* condition: making manifest *dasein*’s facticity, it enables the rare instances in which we encounter

ourselves in an original way. Accordingly, it is not surprising that Heidegger grants to certain moods a methodological role within his endeavor of a fundamental analytic of *dasein*. Both angst and boredom – as *Grundstimmungen* – are capable of providing ontological insights.

3. Angst – breakdown of significance

In § 40 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger provides an encompassing phenomenological exposition of ‘angst’ – a word we leave untranslated because it is doubtful whether what Heidegger drives at with it comes close enough to what is meant by ‘anxiety’ in colloquial English (cf. Withy 2012). The analysis of angst occupies a central position in division one of *Being and Time*: Despite the rarity of pure angst in everyday life, angst has the potential to disclose the being of *dasein* in particular clarity. Heidegger is not very explicit about why certain moods – and not others – possess this exquisite *ontological* potential. No doubt he assumes – in line with the hermeneutical circle – that this will become clear only during the phenomenological analysis of the mood in question.

In the case of angst, the ‘depth’ of this predicament is obvious from the get-go, namely from the contrast with fear. Whereas fear is directed at some particular approaching entity that is characterized by its being *detrimental* (‘abträglich’) to *dasein*, anxiety is not directed at any particular entity. Heidegger here builds on the intuition that angst – as opposed to fear – is *objectless*, which means that it is potentially limitless in its scope as it is anchored nowhere in particular and thus, potentially, everywhere at once. That ‘in the face of which’ one has angst [*das Wovor der Angst*] is totally indeterminate – angst-ridden *dasein* does not know what it is that it is anxious of. This indeterminacy encroaches upon everything there is – all innerworldly entities cease to be relevant, everyday significance “collapses into itself” (BT, 186). This leads to the impression that what one is anxious of is ‘nothing and nowhere’: “it is already ‘there’, and yet nowhere; it is so close that it is oppressive and stifles one’s breath, and yet it is nowhere” (BT, 186). Here we glimpse for the first time the central insight that

will become important in what follows: the “nothing and nowhere”, stemming from the utter insignificance of all innerworldly entities, signals a baseline ungroundedness of all and everything. This is what angst, in its characteristically evasive mode of disclosure, reveals: nothing *must* be the way it is – ultimately, nothing even ‘matters’ at all.

Trying to counteract this horrible directedness at ‘nothing’, dasein succumbs to diversions and distractions, craving to remain within a comfort zone beyond the reach of angst’s paralyzing premonitions. Heidegger glosses this tendency as one of ‘fleeing’, as “a fleeing *in the face of itself*” (BT, 184). While turning away into diversions, what it is that dasein flees – namely, itself – is not grasped, not consciously processed, yet, “in turning away from it is disclosed ‘there’.” (BT, 185) So the first focal insight of the angst analysis is that dasein is, as it were, stalked by itself. It is not something dangerous in the world that is fled (like in fear), but exactly the opposite: “what this turning-away does is precisely to *turn thither* towards entities within-the-world by absorbing itself in them” (BT, 186).

It helps to abstract the general structure of this existential condition, as this provides a preview into the everyday mode of the political. One might say that dasein is presented in the angst analysis as existing on two different planes, which are entwined in an unstable and shifting way: One existential plane pertains to the ungroundedness and insecurity of being-in-the-world; it is a mode of existing *in face of* the utter lack of foundations, in the instability of all things, oneself (and all that is familiar and dear to one) certainly included. Yet, this plane of insecure situatedness – this ‘hovering over the abyss’ – is overlaid with a veneer of surface activity, social practices, discourse and general ‘clamor’ or chattiness: routine comportment, commonplace ways of relating to addressing and understanding others, oneself and one’s surroundings. Taken together, these thickets of the commonplace institute a ‘world’ of everyday familiarity – an existential comfort zone, the “warp and weft of all our days” (Haugeland 2013, 54). Yet, while pervasive and all-enveloping, this paramount surface plane of existence is itself essentially unstable. It is fragile, prone to disruption, it is haunted by

what is excluded and blocked out during its institution. At any time, for no particular reason, angst can break through and shake us out of our absorption in the familiar.

It is our conviction that this unstable duality of existential planes – a tectonic intertwining of ungroundedness at base and a tentative surface stability – resembles the way that politics and the political intertwine within everyday human life. For the most part, politics is a tedious matter of social organization, of regulations, rules and restrictions characteristic of governing institutions; yet, against the grain of these normalizing routines of day-to-day governance, a characteristic ontological fragility flashes up in rare moments. Suddenly, there are cracks in the edifice of social organization, an uncanny sense of contingency besets the public routines. This may then give rise to an awareness of political possibility: if things do not rest on secure foundations, they might as well be organized differently.

This resembles the consequences Heidegger ascribes to an encounter with angst. Angst is a genuinely ontological condition, as an insight dawns in this conditions that does not pertain to entities but to being as such: “What oppresses us is not this or that, nor is it the summation of everything present-at-hand; it is rather the *possibility* of the ready-to-hand in general; that is to say, it is the world itself” (BT, 187). Angst has taken us from the realm of entities (*Seiendes*), which is a realm of putative stability and order, to the conditions of possibility of entities (*Sein*). What is more, it reveals our uncanny involvement in the entities’ constitution. The insight of angst is that it is *us* who, as being-in-the-world, enact a meaningful world *into being*, by ‘finding’ entities significant in the course of our activities. Our *involvement in world-constitution* is what angst is all about: “That which anxiety is anxious about is being-in-the-world itself” (BT, 187).

To be sure, Heidegger is not himself concerned with giving the lessons of angst a political spin. On the face of it, Heidegger’s angst analysis drives us away from all things considered political, if by ‘political’ we mean the domain of public affairs and interpersonal relations. Heidegger channels the insight of angst into the direction of dasein’s authentic

existence, the possibility of freedom and of ‘choosing oneself’, in the sense of transitioning from unowned to owned, i.e. resolute dasein. Angst is said to *individualize* – that means angst pulls dasein out of all entanglements with public life: “This individualization brings dasein back from its falling, and makes manifest to it that authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of its being.” (BT, 191)

Yet the flip side of owned existence is the active constitution of entities as meaningful, in other words, the disclosure of world. What angst reveals is the ontological ‘role’ of dasein: constituting a world by way of existing authentically. Dasein’s *being-free* “for the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself” is both the “authenticity of its own being, and for this authenticity as a possibility which it always already is” and the being that it is required to take over, as it is “delivered over” to it (BT, 188). Angst discloses the ungroundedness of both dasein and world by making manifest the burden upon dasein to take over (its) being as being-in-the-world. Thus, angst lets dasein simultaneously face itself *and* confront the world *as* world. The uncanniness of angst signals with merciless inevitability that *it is upon* dasein to freely enact a world – or else have everything meaningful drain away into utter insignificance.

Thus, despite the seemingly unpolitical character of Heidegger’s analysis, we can see that, on a deeper level, angst leads us into a dimension that is discernible as political *in potentia*: Angst discloses freedom, in the sense of ungroundedness and indeterminacy of being. Thereby, it discloses both the *possibility* and *necessity* to give shape to what is not otherwise determined, to create and maintain a meaningful world above the abyss of meaninglessness. This is, in effect, the essence of the political; in the words of Hannah Arendt: “The *raison d’etre* of politics is freedom” (Arendt 1961, 146). What Arendt hints at is not just the ontic requirement that political activity depends on the prior fulfillment of certain vital functions (i.e. is ‘free’ in the sense of not being bound entirely by the reproduction of life, or being free from manifest force and oppression), but the more fundamental ontological state of existential indeterminacy: The possibility and necessity of collective self-

determination under conditions of contingency. Arendt's dictum is an echo of Heidegger's Kierkegaard-inspired insight into the ungroundedness of existence as revealed by angst.

In view of this baseline condition of the political, we can re-phrase the overall structure of the angst analysis in explicitly political terms. While the 'world' of everyday dasein is superficially sealed up against any genuine political impulse by assuming the guise of encompassing routine and regularity, at any time a premonition of contingency *might* arise, so that those immersed in regular commerce suddenly realize that public matters might as well be otherwise. A sense of groundlessness, pointlessness, maybe even annoyance with the way things are arises unexpectedly. It is not yet a premonition of revolution, but it is a 'coming to oneself' as potentially able to effect change, either directly or indirectly, and it is a sense that it is *upon oneself* to do so: a foreshadowing of one's potential agency. To be sure, this sense of potential agency does not in itself provide us with a direction as to how to intervene in the established constitution of the world. And just because things could be otherwise it is not certain that one's intervention – if one decided to move to action – would be of any effect. Nevertheless, the ontological realization that the current shape of the world is not grounded in any socio-transcendent foundation, that worldly (read: human) affairs do not need to be the way they are, might serve as the first step towards engaging actively with the messy field of politics. Thus, it is not surprising that Arendt's line on politics continues thus: "The *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action" (Arendt 1961, 146).

Of course, as Heidegger's endeavor is that of fundamental ontology, he does not devote much space to pondering different surface manifestations of its ontological structure. And surely, his expressed purpose is not that of awakening dasein to *political* consciousness. Yet, what he strives for is to awaken dasein 'to itself', as actively in charge of its fate within worldly constellations that need not be the way they currently are. It is this sense of

contingency and openness that provides an outlook into the political. We can interrogate this dimension further by discussing the related considerations pertaining to boredom.

4. **Profound Boredom**

Boredom marks another affective route into the depth of *dasein* that Heidegger is at pains to sketch out. It is in many respects parallel to the route charted by *angst* and both conditions arise out of the same existential abyss: from the utter ungroundedness of existence. Heidegger's remarks on boredom form an integral part of his lecture course *The Basic Concepts of Metaphysics. World, Finitude, Solitude* presented in Freiburg in 1929/30. In Heidegger's oeuvre, this lecture occupies an intermediate position between *Being and Time* and his fatal stint as NSDAP-approved *Führer-Rektor* of Freiburg University in 1933/1934. We will soon see that, towards the end of his reflections on boredom, a foreshadowing of this ruinous phase is clearly in evidence.

The 180 pages of the lecture script devoted to boredom do not merely offer a description of boredom. It is crucial to the functioning of the lecture course that it works as a performative evocation or enactive instalment of boredom. An important part of Heidegger's narrative concerns the fact that profound boredom is so catastrophically obtrusive, so shockingly unbearable that we – everyday *dasein* – will throw everything we have in its way in order to prevent it from even arising. Or, in case boredom *has* managed to arise, we will try everything to prevent it from becoming any deeper: all sorts of routine distractions and diversions – modes of *Zeitvertreib* – are mobilized so as to ensure boredom won't get a good hold of us. That is why we for the most part will not 'find' boredom simply occurring in our lives, as some mental state or mood among others – because all manner of routine activities and engagements always already occupy the space on which it could manifest itself. Boredom

is 'there' as an absence, by having distractions stand in for it. Thus, the main task of the lecture course becomes to awaken this concealed but basic attunement (cf. FCM, §16).

We cannot retell Heidegger's full account of boredom. Instead we zoom in on a few decisive points, mostly concerning the third and deepest form of boredom. In the rare case of profound boredom – epitomized by the phrase '*it is boring for one*' – existence is modified to the point of an extreme. In the second of the three forms of boredom – '*being bored with something*' – the bored person's existence is *temporarily* transformed into a circumscribed period of dead time. The *first* variety – '*becoming bored by something*' – is the mundane case where a thing, item, or situation holds us up and thus bores us (Heidegger's example is a shabby train station in the middle of nowhere where one is forced to wait).

Before turning to the third and deepest form, we dwell a little on the second form of boredom, because it can help give us a relatively lucid grasp of what Heidegger is driving at. Heidegger's example for the second variety of boredom is a dinner party in which we outwardly participate in a lively and engaged way, but where we afterwards admit that we were horribly bored throughout. Heidegger explicates that the bored person's 'self' is abandoned, left dangling, as it were, in an odd suspension: by superficially engaging in the dinner party activities, a portion of existence, a manifest span of lived time gets cut off from a temporal context essential for lending it meaning – from a *past* providing a reservoir of significance, and from a *future* providing direction for one's current pursuits. This is what engenders the obtrusive sense of 'losing oneself' to the situation, it is simply a lost portion of lifetime (cf. FCM, 119 [180]). Boredom is literally the affliction of *time's becoming long*, explicit in the German term *Langeweile*. Lived time becomes oppressive as it is emptied of meaningful activity, and boredom is this gradual transformation of lived time – what Bergson's described as *durée* – from the unremarkable, taken-for-granted background of our moment-to-moment existence into a conspicuous foreground matter. The less there is to do or worth our doing, the more a dense, obtrusive, all-consuming temporal 'emptiness' takes hold

of us – unbearable in its suffocating presence. Consequently, in this state of being, existence is put on hold and turned into a ‘standing now’ (*stehendes Jetzt*), i.e. a state of existential futility (cf. FCM, 125 [189]). Nothing happens that is *of relevance*, so nothing *matters*, nothing *fulfills* one. As profoundly unfulfilled, yet ours – after all, it is time we freely allocated in order to go to the dinner party – this span of time becomes obtrusive, arresting, suffocating. Like sand on the beach, a span of life-time runs idly through our fingers; seeing it slip away instills a cold horror in us. It seems as though time itself dimly resonates in the marrow of our bones.

Turning from the second to the third and most profound form of boredom (*‘it is boring for one’*), we see that not just a limited period of life invested in one specific activity, but rather the entirety of existential temporality is modified. In this third variety of boredom, the *entire* temporal horizon of existence now stretches out indefinitely, takes on a suffocating vastness, besetting us with stasis and rendering everything there is utterly indifferent. “Entities have – as we say – become indifferent *as a whole*, and we ourselves as these people are not excepted. We no longer stand as subjects and suchlike opposite these entities and excluded from them, but find ourselves in the midst of entities as a whole, i.e., in the whole of this indifference.” (FCM, 138 [208] – translation modified) The breakdown of meaning in profound boredom is not limited to a specific situation or domain, it is related to the meaninglessness of entities as a whole. Moreover, in profound boredom not only all entities – everything there is – at once cease to matter, but also *we ourselves* are now literally transformed into a ‘no one’: “It is boring for one. It – for one – not me as me, not for you as you, not for us as us, but *for one*.” (FCM, 134f. [203])

Exactly at this deepest point of an all-consuming lack of sense, however, a specific possibility emerges. Boredom issues a message to *dasein*: “All telling *refusal* [*Versagen*] is in itself a *telling* [*Sagen*], i.e., a making manifest. What do beings in this telling refusal of themselves as a whole tell us in such refusal? [...] The very *possibilities* of its [*dasein*’s]

doing and acting. [...] [It] makes them known in refusing them.” (FCM, 140 [211f.]) Boredom’s extreme transformation of existence creates a situation of heightened responsiveness in which the very features of existence that have been so radically modified are suddenly rendered salient: “[T]his peculiar impoverishment which sets in with respect to ourselves in this ‘it is boring for one’ first *brings* the *self* in all its nakedness *to itself* as the self that *is there* and has taken over the being-there of its Da-sein” (FCM, 143 [214]) In this way, Heidegger suggests that profound boredom might facilitate dasein’s *waking up* again.

What is it that profound boredom reveals and that has the potential of awakening dasein again? In short, profound boredom makes the very existential structure of Dasein salient: “what it *gives to be free* in its telling announcement – is nothing less than the *freedom of Dasein* as such.” (FCM, 148f. [223]) The overbearing experience of an utter lack of meaningful activities confronts dasein with the task of giving meaning to its life by projecting itself towards possibilities without ever being able to ground their meaning in any other source than its own projecting. Profound boredom has thus the potential to stir awake nothing less than our freedom by forcing us back into the very task of our existence. In colloquial terms, one might gloss the message of profound boredom as the task of ‘getting one’s act together’, pulling oneself out of the slumber of futility into the resolute act: rising to the occasion, *no matter* how idle and futile everything might have seemed just a moment ago.

In terms of temporality, this means that we are tasked to transform the ‘standing now’ back into the *lived presence* of the *Augenblick*. In deep boredom, lived time flattens into vast expanse of all-consuming insignificance – while by contrast, in the *Augenblick*⁵, dasein is concentrated again into a single focal point, into an *extreme* of a self-enabling act, here and now; an act that requires our active engagement. It is that format of temporality that equals resolute and responsible agency, the very temporality of the *act* itself – its moment of truth (cf. FCM, 149 [223]).

Again, this appears to carry us quite far away from anything concerning the political. However, in the case of boredom – in contrast to angst – a specific link to ‘the political’ is a constitutive feature of Heidegger’s own project. Heidegger underscores that we will miss profound boredom if we search for it as if it were an individual’s psychological state: “it is not necessarily an objection to our claim of a basic attunement being there in our Dasein if one of you, or even many, or all of you assure us that you are unable to ascertain such an attunement in yourselves when you observe yourselves. For in the end there is nothing at all to be found by observation” (FCM, 60 [90f.]) Whereas the discussion of angst in *Being and Time* points the reader towards an individualistic interpretation of angst as a *Grundstimmung* that pulls dasein out of the routines of everyday life and into the authentic possibilities of its existence, boredom is introduced from the start as a form of communal attunement. In contrast to *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests here that *Grundstimmungen* do not primarily attune an individual dasein. The ‘subject’ of basic attunements is rather a *Volk*, i.e. a particular community that separates itself from other communities. Moreover, whereas the possibility of angst appears to be introduced as an invariant structure of dasein – always looming in the depth of dasein’s existence –, Heidegger now claims that *Grundstimmungen* are historically and culturally variable – they are always the basic attunement of a particular community in a particular age (cf. Ringmar 2017). Against the background of this modified account of basic attunements, Heidegger explains that the task of his lecture course is to awaken “one” (not “the”) attunement, namely “our” attunement (FCM 59 [89]) – the *Grundstimmung* of the German *Volk*.

Thus, Heidegger’s analysis of profound boredom is inextricably entangled with the question of *Volk* or political community. As he writes at the onset of his analysis: “We must awaken a fundamental attunement, then! The question immediately arises as to *which* attunement we are to awaken or let become wakeful in us. An attunement that pervades *us* fundamentally? Who, then, are *we*?” (FCM, 69 [103]) We fail to appreciate the full depth of

Heidegger's analysis if we ignore what is politically at stake here. According to Heidegger, the analysis of *Grundstimmungen* leads into the founding dimension of political communities: the dimension of the political, where the awakening of a basic attunement serves as the invocation of a particular community. As Heidegger states, *Grundstimmungen* can never be traced or tracked, but only invoked or awakened. Thus, neither basic attunements nor the political communities which they assemble are factual matters waiting to be empirically detected. Heidegger's *Volk* is not based on any positive foundation, it is not a matter of anthropology or sociology, nor one of history in a conventional sense. On the contrary, it is the awakening of a *Grundstimmung* itself which serves as the founding act of a particular *Volk*.

Thus, Heidegger's understanding of a people is far removed from any blood and soil ideology, but this does not mean that it is deeply troubling consequences of its own. Heidegger's entanglement of *Grundstimmung* and *Volk*, affective world-disclosure and political community, leads to an unsettling call for political activism. For Heidegger, answering the question 'who are we' is the same as understanding the demand profound boredom places on us. What is the demand of profound boredom? Heidegger's answer is alarmingly clear and determined: "It is that Dasein as such is demanded of man, that it is given to him – to be there." (FCM, 165 [246]) Heidegger expands on the task he sees expressed in profound boredom's telling refusal in the following passage:

We do not know it to the extent that we have forgotten that man, if he is to become what he *is*, in each case has to throw Dasein upon his shoulders. [...] Yet because we are of the opinion that we no longer need to be strong or to expect to throw ourselves open to danger, all of us together have also already slipped out of the danger-zone of Dasein within which, in taking our Dasein upon ourselves, we may perhaps overreach ourselves. [...] Man must first resolutely open himself again to this demand. The necessity of this disclosive resolution is what is contained in the telling refusal and

simultaneously telling announcement of the moment of vision of our Dasein. (FCM, 165 [246f.])

In a surprising turn, Heidegger transforms the fundamental insight of boredom – the utter absence of meaning, the realization that nothing *really* matters in and of itself – into a mobilizing appeal, a call to arms. Through his analysis of boredom, he issues a demand to his listeners: he urges them to constitute themselves, through the act of collective self-determination, as a political community, a *Volk*. With hindsight, we know well where this will lead him just a few years on, and the signs pointing in that direction are already very clear in this lecture from 1930. From about section 38 onward, Heidegger's lecture crashes down from the heights of existential ontology into what sounds like an odd mixture of philosophy and the convoluted eyewash of an aspiring Nazi party leader.

Heidegger's response to the experience of ungroundedness and radical alterability – an experience he carved out so masterfully in his analyses of angst and boredom – is the immediate closure of this space of openness and possibility in and though the demand for a resolute decision, which constitutes new meaning and leaves no room for pondering or doubt. It seems that Heidegger, when facing the political as such, does not bear the sense of freedom and openness which it implies. Thus, a pluralistic and democratic understanding of what angst and boredom might reveal to us is excluded from the outset. At this point, we need to remind ourselves of the warnings issued by Hannah Arendt and Claude Lefort: The response to the experience of the political does not need to be a democratic one; it can also lead on the path of totalitarianism (Arendt 1973, Lefort 1986). Heidegger serves as a case in point. His incapability of bearing the experience of an utter ungroundedness of existence led him to the call for an immediate decision to lay a new foundation, to make life meaningful again – no matter what it is that will give live meaning. In that way, a collective sense of possibility – the *modus operandi* of democracy – is given no chance of arising.

5. The collapse of dasein and work in the Rektoratszeit

It makes sense to follow this fatal route a step further and briefly take a look at Heidegger's stint as NSDAP-approved *Führer-Rektor* of Freiburg University (1933/1934).⁶ What did resolute existence – the overcoming of boredom – concretely amount to for Heidegger at that time, when he decided to actively join the national socialist movement and its party? Literary critic Werner Hamacher (2002), who has provided a lucid deconstruction of Heidegger's *Rektorats-Philosophie*, is a competent guide for this purpose.⁷

The gist of what Heidegger proclaimed in that fatal year between the spring of 1933 and the spring of 1934 – and how it connects to key strands of his pre-1933 thought – comes to the fore in his “Rede an Arbeitslose” (*Speech to the Unemployed*) on 22 October 1933 at Freiburg University.⁸ In short, and befitting the National Socialist German Worker's party (NSDAP), dasein is and has to be *Arbeit* (work). Readily, Heidegger inscribes his existential analytic into the activism, dynamism and pan-workerism of the Nazi workers' state. In a 1934 Lecture on logic, Heidegger is particularly explicit about this, and we find here his characteristic move of ontologizing a mode of existence so as to expose it as unquestionably essential (‘*wesentlich*’):

Unsere Bestimmung erwirken, je nach Umkreis des Schaffens ins Werk setzen und ins Werk bringen – das heißt *arbeiten*. [...] Arbeit ist hier die zur Bestimmtheit unseres Wesens gewordene Bestimmung, die Prägung und das Gefüge des Vollzuges unserer Sendung und der Erwirkung unseres Auftrages im jeweiligen geschichtlichen Augenblick. [...] Geschichtliche Gegenwart erwächst als Arbeit aus Sendung und Auftrag, und so erwächst die Gegenwart aus Zukunft und Gewesenheit.” (GA 38, 128)

Notably, *Arbeit* is here positioned exactly at the place occupied by the *Augenblick*, the present-moment, in both *Being and Time* and in the boredom lecture. The moment of the

resolute act – from which the ownmost possibilities of *dasein* are said to spring – has now become the place of work in the service of the *NS-Arbeitsstaat*, mandated by *Volk* and *Führer*. It can be sobering indeed for those friendly to Heidegger's thought to see how readily and seamlessly even the deep layers of the existential analytic are recruited to serve this dire remnant of a philosophy. Heidegger with gleeful precision planted the political watchwords of his day – in this case: work – at the pinnacle of his conceptual edifice.

The point for present purposes is that work – and the activism and uncritical obedience to 'higher orders' it entailed – was also brought forth by Heidegger as the adequate answer to the predicament of boredom. In the years following the 1929/30 lecture course, Heidegger sees in work the prime source of existential sense and meaning, and the point in responding to boredom, as we have seen, is an aggressive jump into collective meaning-yielding commitments. This jump, this resolute decision to have something matter to one, both collectively and individually – no matter what it is – is in this particular phase of Heidegger's thought equated with work.

It is important to remind ourselves of the fact that of all the things from Nazi Germany that German society and culture abandoned after WWII, work surely was not one of them. Hamacher (2002) diagnoses a worrisome continuity in the prizing and praising of work between the NS period and postwar Germany. This problematic is worthy of further consideration. Heidegger certainly saw this himself. Soon after he self-presented as the mobilizer and motivator of the German workers' state, and shortly after his stint as principal of Freiburg University, he reversed his views on the matter, now seeing in work the metaphysical epitome of modern subjectivity posited as an absolute. His notes on Ernst Jünger's *Der Arbeiter* are instructive in this regard (cf. GA 90), and likewise his writings on technology. One is surely right to chastise Heidegger for the horrific aberration of his philosophy during the early 1930s, and for his failure to ever address this phase later in a straightforward and accountable way. However, to what extent the rampant workerism of this

phase and the krypto-authoritarian ethics it was packaged with actually resonated within main currents of 20th century Western philosophy remains a matter for further exploration.

It is clear that we need a robust corrective to this delirious devotion to work as the paramount value in human existence, an antidote likewise to an austere work ethic and to the meagre vision of philosophy that has sprung up in its adjacency. Even more important is a clearer understanding of the paramount ‘political moment’ that Heidegger’s early philosophy brings about, and likewise a grasp of the dangers inherent in this situation of affective ungroundedness.

6. The affective (un)grounding of politics

To sum up what we did so far: We have seen that certain *Grundstimmungen* serve a crucial ontological function. These basic attunements disclose the fundamental ontological make-up of *dasein*, the most basic conditions of its being-in-the-world. More specifically, the *Grundstimmungen* of angst and boredom disclose the radical ungroundedness of existence, the indeterminacy of one’s live and the world one is embedded into. This uncanny sense of contingency and openness reveals the possibility and inevitability of freedom, and thereby provides an outlook into the domain of the political. Angst and boredom are rare moments in which the ontological fragility of familiar surface activities becomes apparent, making salient our existential condition of having to decide the undecidable, to give shape to what is not otherwise shaped – an act of freedom which, following Arendt, can be described as the essence of democracy: plural self-determination under conditions of contingency.

An affectively disclosed encounter with ungroundedness confronts us with the insight that no specific way of live can ultimately be justified once and for all; no direction, tendency or orientation appears, in the last resort, more relevant or meaningful than any other. On the other hand, our cohabitation of the world – what Arendt calls plurality – constitutes the

inescapability of living together with one another.⁹ The requirement of determining our ultimately undetermined lives under conditions of plurality leads to the possibility and necessity of organizing our sometimes coinciding, sometimes conflicting, but always overlapping and interfering modes of live (cf. Butler 2016). In this situation, the decisive question is: How do we respond to the affective disclosure of ungroundedness?

Following Claude Lefort, we can accentuate the socio-political significance of this issue in terms of the double body of the king (cf. Kantorowicz 1957) and its aftermath. Whereas the king's natural body is born, ages and dies like all human bodies, his spiritual body transcends mundane mortality. It represents the unity of the political body; it is the symbol of the divine right to rule; and allows for the succession of kings, as is symbolized in the expression: 'The king is dead, long live the king'. Lefort draws on this thought and suggests that after the "democratic revolution" society can no longer be defined in terms of such a unified social body:

Power appears as an empty place and those who exercise it are mere mortals who occupy it only temporarily or who could install themselves in it only by force or cunning. There is no law that can be fixed, whose articles cannot be contested, whose foundations are not susceptible of being called into question. Lastly, there is no representation of a centre and of the contours of society: unity cannot now efface social division. Democracy inaugurates the experience of an ungraspable, uncontrollable society in which the people will be said to be sovereign, of course, but whose identity will constantly be open to question, whose identity will remain latent. (Lefort 1986, 303f.)

The mainspring of this postfoundational line of thought is that neither foundationalism nor anti-foundationalism are viable options. Subscribing to anti-foundationalism by giving up transcendental discourse altogether leads to a form of naïve, unreflected, everyday

empiricism, which is most powerfully enacted in the political doctrine of economic necessities ('there is no alternative'). On the other hand, going back to foundationalism comes at the cost of totalitarianism – the attempt to reestablish fixed foundations can only proceed by neglecting their contingent status in a totalitarian act of unification. This apparent dilemma led a number of postfoundational thinkers (cf. Lacoue-Labarthe/Nancy 1997) to proclaim the domain of *the political* as the sphere of the possible contestation of all foundations, a domain of quasi-transcendental discourse. Proclaiming the autonomy of the political against the dominant surface processes of politics underscores the need of theory, and indeed philosophizing, to enable us to continuously contest the available foundations within a given historical situation (cf. Marchart 2007).

Postfoundational theories of the political could build on Heidegger's insight that certain basic attunements, by pulling us out of the comfort of everyday routine, confront us with the abyss that lies at the basis of existence. By suspending all specific possibilities, the basic attunements of angst and boredom make "manifest for the first time what generally *makes* pure possibilities *possible* (*das Ermöglichende*) – or, as Heidegger says, 'the originary *possibilitization*' (*die ursprüngliche Ermöglichung*)" (Agamben 2004, 66). Arendt and Lefort transformed this postfoundational insight into a republican model of politics in terms of freedom and contingency. Others drew more agonistic conclusion, understanding politics – rather than as a search for consensus about the organization of our way of life – as a matter of conflict and struggle. Jacques Rancière, for example, identifies the political with the struggle of those who do not have a share in the current division of society; for him, the political only emerges in the fight over 'the part of those without part' (*la part des sans-part*) (cf. Ranciere 2004). In a similar vein, Chantal Mouffe suggests that for people to be able to enact their freedom, the political needs to be the arena of substantive conflict (cf. Mouffe 2013).

We cannot provide a discussion of those different ontologies of the political here. Instead, let us conclude by coming back to Lefort and his suggestion that twentieth century

politics is characterized by a basic antagonism of democracy and totalitarianism. Indeed, he maintained that totalitarianism arose from the democratic situation (cf. Lefort 1986, 301). Whereas democracy requires that power is “an empty place” (Lefort 1988, 225) that can only be taken temporarily by one group – power is essentially contested and no group can claim to represent society as whole – totalitarianism claims that society can be reunified by a single source of power in the image of the “People-as-One” (Lefort 1986, 304).

We submit that this antagonism is latently present at the core of Heidegger’s reflection on *Befindlichkeit*: Although his analyses of the affective disclosure of ungroundedness in angst and boredom represent the most salient expositions of postfoundational political affectivity, it seems as though Heidegger could not bear the openness and indeterminacy of a genuine political moment. His own response was a demand for activism, bound to a command from being as such, to establish meaning and determinacy – even at the costs of autocracy. Instead of following the encounter with contingency and indeterminacy into a configuration of democratic politics that is able to keep open the quest of the political, Heidegger responded with the appeal to intellectual and political authority and leadership that closes the space of political possibility. Whereas many postfoundational thinkers urged for an institutional configuration of politics that is able to keep open the political as such, Heidegger’s fateful path highlights the power of an undemocratic response. Herein lies the inevitable ambivalence of the ontology of political affectivity.

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¹ Jan Slaby's work on this article was part of the research activities of the subproject B05 of the Collaborative Research Center 1171 Affective Societies, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG); Gerhard Thonhauser's work on this article was part of a project funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF): J-4055. We thank several critical readers and discussants for helpful suggestions, notably Anna Bortolan, Andreas Elpidorou,

Denis McManus, Nikola Mirkovic, Dermot Moran, Julian Reid, Michael Richardson, Erik Ringmar, Panos Theodorou, Tatjana Noemi Tömmel, Veronika Vasterling, and the editor of this volume, Christos Hadjioannou.

² As is common in Heidegger scholarship, we refer to the pagination of the German original which appeared as volume 29/30 of the *Gesamtausgabe*.

³ In the case of *Being and Time*, we refer to the page numbers of the German edition of *Sein und Zeit* published by Niemeyer. The English translations are based on the edition by Macquarrie and Robinson (Heidegger 1962), but we took the liberty to modify them where we found it appropriate.

⁴ We can only provide a very brief discussion of the general notion of *Befindlichkeit* here; for more detailed elaborations on the preceding and the following points, see, for instance Elpidorou & Freeman (2015), Freeman & Elpidorou (2015), Ratcliffe (2013), Slaby (2015; 2017a), Withy (2014; 2015).

⁵ The originally Kierkegaardian notion *Augenblick* is usually translated into English as the ‘moment of vision’.

⁶ The text of this section is reproduced with permission from Slaby (2017b).

⁷ The following all too brief thoughts are also inspired by Erich Hörl’s (2013) re-working of some of Hamacher’s thoughts in the context of a reflection on technology.

⁸ The original speech tellingly appeared in print in the NS journal *Der Alemanne. Kampfblatt der Nationalisten Oberbadens*, February 1, 1934. Of course, the seminal text in this phase of Heidegger’s works is his infamous *Rektoratsrede* (cf. Heidegger 1933/1983).

⁹ Whereas we – following Arendt – invoke an Aristotelian view on the political (understanding the political as the task of deciding about our way of life under conditions of plurality and indeterminacy), Heidegger appears to ultimately support a Platonic view on politics. Despite his groundbreaking insights into the fundamental ungroundedness of human existence, Heidegger appears to believe (at least for certain stretches of his life) that an ultimate salvation is possible if only we unconditionally submerge ourselves to an authentic understanding of the meaning that being gives to us in something like a stroke of fate (cf. Theodorou 2013).