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Melancholia, Mourning, Movements: The Mobilization of Passions and Struggle for Hegemony in Thailand

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Abstract

Political movements often articulate their identities through the experience of loss, evoking shared attachments and passions. This paper argues that the psychoanalytic concepts of melancholia and mourning help illuminate how politics of loss operate in shaping collective identity and hegemony. Drawing from Thailand's political conflicts between 2019 and 2022—between patriotic-conservative and progressive-democratic forces—the paper distinguishes two forms of political mobilization: melancholic attachment to an idealized past and mourning-like transformation toward new possibilities. Identifying with lost objects not only generates affective energy but also constitutes a struggle for hegemony through the creation of empty signifiers such as order or future. This psychosocial framework reveals how movements mobilize desire and passion in pursuit of political dominance.

Keywords: melancholia, mourning, political mobilization, loss, hegemony, Thailand

1. Introduction

Within psychoanalytic political thought, loss has become a key concept in understanding identity and collective action. Freud's theory of identification suggests that who we are is shaped by the objects and ideals we lose. Butler (2003) extends this insight to the political sphere, arguing that communities are founded on shared losses they can never fully overcome. Loss thus becomes the emotional glue that binds people together. Political movements frequently organize around narratives of loss—whether the loss of jobs, stability, sovereignty, or justice. These narratives, consciously or not, mobilize affective attachments and shape political discourse. In Thailand's post-coup context, both conservative and progressive movements deploy loss differently: one clings to a nostalgic image of national unity, the other imagines a foreclosed future. This essay explores how melancholia and mourning capture these affective dynamics and how their respective “lost objects” structure political struggle and hegemony.

Similarly, Itthiphon Kotamee (2018) argues that Thailand's two major political camps legitimize their struggles through distinct modes of justification. The Yellow Shirts draw legitimacy from traditional and conventional authority, while the Red Shirts ground their claims in electoral legitimacy. However, his study shows that each movement employs multiple and evolving forms of legitimation. The People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) invoked

traditional and conventional bases of authority, whereas the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) gradually rejected those old social values and developed its own distinct discursive vocabulary, emphasizing popular approval and universal principles as sources of legitimacy. Later, the People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC)—a conservative anti-Thaksin movement—introduced new forms of legitimacy based on expertise and personal qualities, replacing earlier claims to universal values and mass endorsement. These differences reflect a persistent divide between conservative and democratic conceptions of political legitimacy in Thailand.

1.1 Research Objective

This study examines how melancholia and mourning shape affective political mobilization and hegemonic struggle in Thailand through the construction of lost objects and empty signifiers.

2. Literature review

Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917/1957) established loss as foundational to psychic life. Mourning involves acknowledging and detaching from the lost object, allowing new attachments; melancholia internalizes the loss, refusing separation. Butler (1997; 2003) extended this to political life—arguing that communities are sustained by shared, unavowable losses. Glynos and Voutyras (2016) further demonstrated how blocked mourning in Greek austerity discourse transformed guilt into political paralysis. Žižek (2000) reframed melancholia as the misrecognition of lack as loss—a refusal to face structural incompleteness. Laclau (2007) and Mouffe (1985) reinterpreted this in discourse theory: political hegemony depends on “empty signifiers” that organize collective desire (e.g., freedom, order, future). Movements succeed when they emotionally invest in such signifiers, turning abstract absence into affective presence.

Recent works (Roy 2009; Dean 2022; Supachalasai 2023) illustrate how the melancholic mode often stabilizes reactionary forces, while mourning allows creative re-signification and social transformation. This psychosocial synthesis frames how Thai political movements mobilize passions through their relationships to loss and fantasy.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in discourse and psychoanalytic theory. It analyzes political speeches, protest slogans, online campaigns, and media representations from 2019 to 2022, triangulated with secondary literature (McCargo 2021; Lertchoosakul 2021; Zhang 2022). Data were interpreted through two analytical lenses:

1. Melancholia vs. Mourning: tracing whether discourses preserve or transform loss.
2. Hegemonic Signifiers: identifying the emotional investments sustaining order and future.

Rather than quantify protest behavior, this study seeks to understand how affective language organizes collective identity—how loss is symbolically articulated to produce passion and legitimacy.

4. Results

4.1 Melancholia and the Conservative Camp

The patriotic-conservative bloc's discourse was structured by nostalgia and defense of hierarchy. Following Freud's notion of melancholia, conservatives refused to let go of an idealized object — the moral nation under the monarchy. The loss of national harmony was internalized as a collective wound, producing continual repetition of loyalty rituals and moral panic. This discursive melancholia translated into political behavior: defending “nation, religion, king” became an act of emotional repair for the anxiety provoked by social change. The appeal to order and discipline thus functioned as both a symbolic boundary and a compensatory mechanism to repress uncertainty. This conservative affective formation exemplifies what Žižek (2000) calls ideological enjoyment — the pleasure derived from sustaining an impossible ideal. By framing dissent as moral decay, conservative elites redirected social frustration toward internal enemies, transforming trauma into loyalty. Yet this emotional economy also produced what Glynos and Stavrakakis (2008) term ideological blockage: a cycle of passion without innovation, preventing the articulation of new democratic imaginaries.

3.2 Mourning and the Progressive Movement

In contrast, the progressive-democratic camp, led by the Future Forward and later the Move Forward Party alongside the 2020 youth protests, exemplified what Butler (2003) describes as transformative mourning. Instead of denying loss, protesters performed it publicly — transforming grief into creative defiance. The dissolution of the Future Forward Party became a symbolic death that generated new solidarity. Candlelight vigils, flash-mobs, and satirical performances converted mourning into collective agency.

This practice of mourning allowed participants to accept the “death” of the old political order and imagine alternative futures. The slogan “It's been eight years, you bastard!” captured both anger and catharsis — an articulation of loss that no longer fixated on restoration but demanded renewal. The movement's aesthetic practices — memes, songs, and parody of royalist rituals — enacted what Laclau (2007) calls re-signification, filling empty signifiers like freedom and future with plural, democratic content.

3.3 Hegemonic Competition and the Politics of Desire

The confrontation between order and future represents Thailand's central hegemonic struggle. Conservatives attempted to monopolize the moral high ground through appeals to Thainess, harmony, and the monarchy as natural authority. Progressives, by contrast, politicized the future as a field of contingency — a site where ordinary citizens could participate in shaping meaning. Both sought to organize collective desire, but in opposite temporal directions: one backward-looking, the other forward-projective.

Here, Laclau's theory illuminates that hegemony depends not on coercion but on affective investment in signifiers that appear to promise wholeness. The conservative bloc's melancholic desire revolved around restoring a lost totality, while the progressive bloc's mourning-based desire embraced incompleteness as the ground for democracy. This explains why conservative mobilization tends to stabilize hierarchy, whereas progressive mobilization tends to generate discursive innovation even in defeat.

3.4 Affective Infrastructure and Limits of Transformation

Both movements built what can be termed an affective infrastructure—networks of emotion that anchor ideology in everyday life. The conservative side sustained affect through rituals, televised sermons, and moral pedagogy in schools; the progressive side did so through humor, digital memes, and peer communities. The first maintained power through repetition and guilt, the second through participation and hope. Yet both reveal structural limitations.

The conservative camp's melancholia produces ideological paralysis, unable to re-imagine authority beyond the sacred hierarchy. The progressive camp's mourning is generative but fragile: its energy depends on shared emotion more than institutional consolidation. Without stable leadership and organizational durability, affect risks dissipating before producing structural reform. This tension mirrors what Laclau (2007) calls the constitutive incompleteness of hegemony — that every order, however passionate, is temporary and must be continually re-articulated.

3.5 Comparative Synthesis

The Thai case thus demonstrates how affective politics determines hegemonic outcomes. Melancholia reinforces conservative stability by fetishizing loss, while mourning fosters democratic imagination by transforming loss into futurity. In this sense, affect is not peripheral but foundational to political subjectivity. The politics of mourning represents a potential path toward pluralism — not through erasing conflict, but by converting grief into solidarity. Whether Thailand's democratic project can institutionalize this affective momentum remains an open question, yet its emergence already signals a profound re-articulation of what counts as the political.

5. Conclusion

The interplay between melancholia and mourning reveals how emotions shape political allegiance and hegemony. Melancholia fixes movements in nostalgia and repetition; mourning opens a path toward transformation. In Thailand's recent political conflicts, both dynamics coexisted, but the progressive movement's future-oriented mourning displayed greater creative potential. By linking psychoanalysis with discourse theory, this essay highlights how lost objects, fantasies, and empty signifiers underpin the mobilization of passions in politics. Understanding these processes can enrich future research on the affective dimensions of social movements and democratic renewal.

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