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Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Edited by
David Lemmings and Ann Brooks

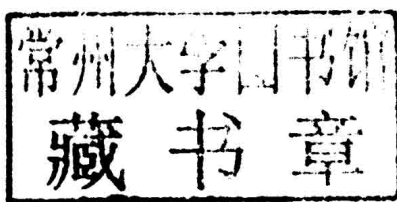
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Emotions and Social Change

This edited collection takes a critical perspective on Norbert Elias's theory of the "civilizing process," through historical essays and contemporary analysis from sociologists and cultural theorists. It focuses on changes in emotional regimes or styles and considers the intersection of emotions and social change, historically and contemporaneously. The book is set in the context of increasing interest among humanities and social science scholars in reconsidering the significance of emotion and affect in society, and the development of empirical research and theorizing around these subjects. Some have labeled this interest as an "affective turn" or a "turn to affect," which suggests a profound and wide-ranging reshaping of disciplines. Building upon complex theoretical models of emotions and social change, the chapters exemplify this shift in analysis of emotions and affect, and suggest different approaches to investigation which may help to shape the direction of sociological and historical thinking and research.

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Ann Brooks and David Lemmings, October 2013

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Introduction

1 The Emotional Turn in the Humanities and Social Sciences

David Lemmings and Ann Brooks

THE EMOTIONAL TURN AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Scholars working in the humanities and social sciences have recently developed a range of concepts and frameworks broadly related to the study of human emotions. Some have gone so far as to label this as a “turn to emotions,” or an “affective turn,” thereby suggesting a profound and wide-ranging reshaping of disciplines and approaches similar to that wrought by the textual or linguistic turn that began in the 1970s.¹ Indeed if the linguistic turn represents our acknowledgment that language helps to constitute reality, then an affective turn implies that emotions have a similarly fundamental role in human experience. Accordingly, this collection of scholarly essays responds to the multidisciplinary shift in focus towards the emotions.

What then, is the turn to emotions, and what are its implications for scholarship, especially in the practice of history and sociology, the two disciplines that frame this book, and among those most obviously influenced? To pose this question is to ask about the place of the emotions in relation to social change, which is the subject of this introduction. It also requires a working definition of emotions. For this second question, Thomas Dixon’s characterization of emotions as “felt judgements”—bodily sensations signaling that one’s current personal situation is or is not in accordance with hopes, values, and well-being—is useful shorthand from the perspective of the individual, because it captures contemporary understandings of emotions as a combination of thought and embodied feeling.² Certainly, fundamental to contemporary humanities and social science approaches to emotions is the shared idea that the emotional life of human beings is not “hardwired,” or wholly determined by biology, as was previously believed by many psychologists, but rather has a cognitive element, constructing meaning in regard to intentions and plans. This recognition of thinking in feeling has important consequences, for if emotional expressions are influenced by cognitive reflection, then the social context that has informed that thinking is important; and since societies and cultures vary, emotions

are implicated in social and historical *change*. Moreover, it is now believed that among individuals emotions help to constitute ideas about the self, for scholars working in the field of the emotions are increasingly rejecting absolute social or cultural constructionism in favor of an element of individual agency or effort by which the performance of affect informs subjective experience.³

Having outlined very broadly the foundations of recent scholarly interest in emotions and the individual self, it is important to understand that some scholars attend rather to “discourse about emotions” (that is writing or speaking about emotions) or “emotional discourses” (meaning communication practices with affective content) because of their utility as a means of explicating social life and power relations, rather than to reveal some presumed interiority, according to more traditional approaches derived from psychology.⁴ For example, the anthropologists Lutz and Abu-Lughod advocate the study of ideas about and interactive expressions of emotions because they reveal norms of social hierarchy and control, competing valuations of morality, and changing patterns of cultural exchange and reproduction. They also insist that in social interactions of all kinds, ranging from everyday life to public affairs, emotion discourses are always in the process of being contested, and as social performance they help to constitute embodied experience. Indeed, from this perspective emotional styles and expressions are not only informed by the cultures that they inhabit; as “operators” in society they can be more than merely epiphenomenal.⁵

According to Sarah Ahmed’s relational analysis of emotions in society, emotion words circulate in “emotional economies.” In other words, as feelings are named and renamed by words in different social contexts but in relation to particular figures they generate affective value by constituting shared “objects of feeling.” Thus in contemporary Western politics the habitual reiteration of negative statements about “illegal immigrants” attracts expressions of rage and generates affect-saturated ideas about the threat that such others pose to “the nation.”⁶ Alternatively, emotional expressions fail to adhere to their subjects because they are not shaped and learned by repetitive experience; or they are successfully contested by different affective systems. In this collection Claire McClisky demonstrates that missionaries in late nineteenth-century Australia sought to inculcate their notions of Christian love and sympathy among the Indigenous people whom they accommodated. Their charges sometimes responded with anger when these affective values offended against their traditional emotional attachment to land, however: or with frustration at the missionaries’ failure to follow through and treat them as equals upon the proper demonstration of Christian emotions. As McClisky comments, far from representing linear transmission of an emotional system, in this case “both missionaries and Aboriginal mission residents were participants (though perhaps not always willing ones) in complex systems of emotional circulation and exchange.” Moreover, as “performatives,” or words that act by constituting the objects

of their attention, reiterated emotional utterances are potentially productive of the human agency essential for social change.⁷

Conceived in these discursive, culturally contingent, and existentially political ways, the study of emotions is rich territory for investigating social practice and change. As suggested, since cultural context influences emotional expressions, emotional styles are always developed interactively in societies; as embodied expressions they are also often presumed to provide signals to others about interior attitudes and character; and among witnesses they may inspire corresponding feelings of compassion or disgust, love or anger. Moreover, different societies and subgroups invariably have “feeling rules,” which serve to channel the expression of affect in a range of contexts, and thereby help to constitute “emotional communities.”⁸ And conforming to these rules inevitably requires “emotional labour.” Thus Arlie Hochschild famously showed how twentieth-century flight attendants were trained to smile at passengers even if they were rude, in conformity with the cheerful service culture of the airline industry.⁹ Moreover, studies of moral panics have revealed the competing deployment of discourses around fear and disgust about others to inscribe or reinscribe social boundaries and legitimize elites.¹⁰ On the other hand, analyses of hate campaigns show that their subjects are interpellated as disempowered objects of disgust, thrust out from the community.¹¹ Indeed, as William Reddy has argued, the management of emotions in communities is the business of power and politics, broadly conceived, and change occurs as individuals and groups challenge and seek to modify dominant emotional regimes that do not allow their selves sufficient “emotional liberty.”¹² Finally, the study of emotional communities is not confined to their features which may be characterized as highly “emotional,” such as love or anger; for if affect is influenced by thinking about goals and ideals, the study of emotions can illuminate everyday social life.

NORBERT ELIAS AND THE CIVILIZING PROCESS

The historical sociologist Norbert Elias studied emotion discourse in medieval and early modern Europe extensively, and his *Civilizing Process* (originally published in 1939) is the most substantial example to date of a historical grand narrative that relates changes in emotional styles and rules to changing social and political contexts. Moreover, because the principal source material of this seminal work was conduct manuals prescribing behavior by regulating the expression of anger and proper application of disgust and shame, Elias’s book also reveals the importance of managing affect as a form of social politics. The *Civilizing Process* has been attractive to cultural historians as a model for critically analyzing the history of emotions in Europe, principally because it articulated a trajectory of development from early medieval to modern times that built upon the insights of

Freudian psychoanalysis to suggest the gradual repression of cruelty, anger, and violence and the advance of shame.¹³ Sociologists too have built upon Elias's insights about emotional regimes and historical change, while critiquing them significantly. For example, in drawing distinctions between the different types of emotional styles associated with long-term historical change, Turner (in this volume) makes the distinction, raised elsewhere by van Krieken, between the kinds of emotions regulated by medieval society, which were fundamentally prescribed by social control structures and crude disciplinary techniques (typically found today in societies advocating *shar'ia law*), and those expressed in contemporary societies where the sophistication and relative openness of social relationships is characterized by a very different set of emotional styles.¹⁴

Considered as a contribution to scholarship, it has been argued that Elias's scheme of the "civilising process" works best as a "history of manners" rather than a history of emotions, as has been shown by a number of social theorists.¹⁵ His discussion concentrates on "courtly manners" and the emergence of the role of the state in the context of a fairly conservative model of social class. Certainly, in attempting to reject the critical class analysis of Marx and particularly the Frankfurt School, from which he parted company after a period as an assistant to Karl Mannheim in the Sociology Department at the University of Frankfurt from 1929 to 1933, Elias attempted to present an alternative developmental trajectory, through an analysis of class within courtly European society.¹⁶ As Turner (in this volume) notes: "[he] described the habitus associated with each class. . . . [as] constituted by the dispositions, norms, and practices that were relevant to the various strata. The control of emotions was an important part of the habitus of bourgeois culture." Indeed, Ahmed has noted that Elias's scheme for developing civilization in Europe depended ultimately on an evolutionary model that represented particular emotional styles as attributes of superior beings. By relating emotions to social hierarchy, however, Elias recognized that the dominant emotional culture, or "emotional regime" of a community depended on relations of power.¹⁷ Despite its flaws, the work of Norbert Elias therefore remains important for scholars who are interested in evaluating the role of emotions in historical change.

There are several other reasons for reaching this conclusion. Firstly, as Stephen Mennell has remarked, Elias understood the poverty of ideas about relating the "individual" to society. Even if we accept that his primary concern was with quotidian "manners," it remains the case that his analysis was preoccupied with people whose ideas and habits were informed by processes of social interaction.¹⁸ This means that however flawed his work was, nevertheless it retains the cardinal virtue of discussing collective human relations and their mutual interdependence. And (secondly), he believed that these dynamic interactive processes contributed to historical change. Thus he saw medieval conduct manuals as elements in a discursive formation derived from the Renaissance court: a process whereby the