

Commentary

Questioning affect and emotion

Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison

Department of Geography, University of Durham, Durham DH1 3LE

Email: Ben.anderson@durham.ac.uk

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Introduction

What does it mean to offer a theory of affect and emotion? In the context of this brief response to Deborah Thien's 'After or beyond feeling? A consideration of affect and emotion in geography' (2005), we reflect on this question. In doing so our aim is to respond to what we feel are problematic aspects of Thien's critique by posing a number of questions around the definition of 'the emotional' which appear to us as vital to geographer's developing engagement with the topic.

However, before posing these questions, we want to emphasize that we write this response from within a diverse literature on affect and emotion within geography and other social sciences. In distinction to Thien, we do not perceive this literature as 'discourage[ing] an engagement with everyday emotional subjectivities' nor do we think that it falls into 'a familiar pattern of distancing emotions from "reasonable" scholarship' (2005, 450). Indeed, we believe that a survey of recent work proves quite the contrary. From the attention to performance and practice that defines non-representational theories (e.g. Harrison 2000; Wylie 2002; Dewsbury 2003; Latham 2003; Anderson 2004) through to work on affect and the composition of the social (e.g. Grossberg 1997; Gibson-Graham *et al.* 2000; Munoz 2000; McKay 2004), there is now a surfeit of work on everyday life. Our point here is that in drawing on only two sources – McCormack (2003) and Thrift (2004) – and those very selectively, Thien runs the risk of only being able to secure her critique by caricaturing and reifying an emergent area of research.

More or less emotional?

One of the main charges made by Thien is that 'recent work' on affect has passed over the human

subject. A consequence of this move 'after or beyond humanity' (p. 450), Thien suggests, is the formation of a politics which is 'masculinist, technocratic and distancing' (p. 452) and insensitive to the 'emotional landscapes of daily life' (p. 453). While at no stage does Thien advance a positive definition of emotion as such, she interprets emotions as primarily meaningful in terms of their being inter-subjective or 'relational' phenomena. However there is a problem here. On the one hand the potential political 'positivity' (p. 453) of emotions is determined as arising from the way in which a 'giving voice' (p. 453) to the emotional allows for the recovery of marginalized subject positions. However, on the other, and somewhat surprisingly, Thien asserts – via Harding and Pribram (2002) – that 'emotional acts' are 'part and parcel of the reproduction of . . . specific categories of subjects and the power relations which constitute them' (quoted p. 453). Surprising not only as this claim contradicts the invocation of the political 'positivity' of an 'emotional subject', but also because of the implication that emotions function as symptoms of a pre-constituted social structure. Despite the reference to Judith Butler (p. 453), emotions are cast here as purely constative and denied a performative aspect, that is to say, emotions are described as significant insofar as they mediate and replicate wider social categories. Yet this account has the consequence of establishing such categories as *causal* or *explanatory*, a move that runs the risk of naturalizing the categories it sets out to critique and, somewhat ironically given the critique of work on affect, of casting emotions primarily in terms of a somewhat automated 'reproduction' (p. 453) of these categories.

Beyond these issues, what we find odd about the apprehension of emotion being forwarded here is

how it seems to be almost exclusively directed at continuing – in social scientific terms – ‘business as usual’. To illustrate this claim, and in the hope of opening the themes of emotion and affect to more diverse engagements, we want to ask the following three questions:

- 1 Are emotions a *distinct* aspect of human existence? On the one hand, Thien presupposes this insofar as emotions may be a distinct topic of study (i.e. the subject/object of emotional geographies). However, on the other, she suggests that there is *no* aspect of human existence that is without emotion (p. 453). The problem here is that, if the latter, then all speech ‘gives voice’ to emotion and Thien’s approach reveals itself to be one which is not primarily concerned with emotions but with social categories and subject positions therein. Which is all well and good, but is this an *emotional* geography or rather a *social* geography which uses emotions as its empirical moment? If it is to be the former then some form of positive statement about what emotions *are* or *are not* must be advanced – even if multiple and only offered to be subject to revision.
- 2 What does it mean to suggest that emotions are ‘relational’? Understood as an analytic position, a relational approach describes *all* phenomena as relational. For us, defining emotions as relational is not the critical step, rather this lies in asking the more complex question of the *how* of different emotional relations, i.e. of the differences between love and hate and between this love and other loves. Without this attention to differences within and between emotions, an attention to their genealogies, conditionalities, potentialities, materialities and so on, we are left with an amorphous object called ‘the emotional’ which risks obscuring exactly what it purports to reveal.
- 3 What does it mean to ground emotions in the figure of the human? We ask this question because despite the references to relationality, Thien’s ontological and political agendas are based in humanism. For Thien, emotions are ‘a fundamental aspect of human experience’ (p. 451) and it is the recovery of these experiences that constitutes emotion’s potential worth to geography. However, this begs a host of questions, not least concerning the implicit universalism and putative authenticity allotted to ‘the emotional’. Questions like, for example, are emotions the same for everyone everywhere? What of ‘idiomatic’ emotional categories which resist translation? Are emotions to be *just* a fundamental

aspect of human experience? Could there be an affectual or emotional geography of animals? And, if so, what is the purpose in describing emotions as ‘emphatically human’ (p. 450)?

Each of these questions are, for us, indicative of how affect and emotion can and perhaps should pose problems to the conduct of social analysis. None of which, it seems to us, amounts to a *disavowal* of the human or the social, nor does it delimit and then deny a ‘feminized “personal”’ (p. 452), rather each question invites a greater engagement with the nature, conditions and possibilities of emotional lives.

Conclusion

To conclude, we would like to offer four propositions for the theorization of affect and emotion. With these propositions we do not mean to determine a specific form of theoretical and empirical engagement, but rather indicate broad fields for diverse engagements. As we put forward these propositions, it is worth noting that just as McCormack and Thrift differ in their accounts of affect and emotion, we differ in ours (compare Anderson 2006 and Harrison 2006).

- 1 A theory of affect and emotion must engage with questions of materiality. Be this in terms of body–brain–culture assemblages or our intimate and prosaic entanglements with the object world, we do not see how such a theory can proceed without beginning to distribute the composition of affect and emotion throughout the world, through, for example, the nervous system, hormones, hands, love letters, screens, crowds, money . . . Without such an acknowledgment of the *spacing* of emotion and affect, any theory runs the risk of idealistic reification.
- 2 A theory of affect and emotion should provoke a rethinking of the nature of the subject or subjects. Not only in terms of the distributions noted above, but because of the radical openness which being capable of or subject to emotions presupposes. Here, thinking through affect and emotion should lead to questions over the emergence of subjectivities from more or less unwilling affectual and emotional assemblages and the consequences of such questions for reflexivity, responsibility, intentionality, autonomy and identity.
- 3 A theory of affect and emotion could experiment with vocabularies specific to the objects of study.

Whether this involves engaging with the silences of testimony, the contagion and transmission of collective affects, or the force of signification, ways need to be found to describe realms of existence which are irreducible to, but exist in complex relations with, discursive and ideological orders. Hence rather than seeking to translate different semantic registers and arrays into the standard lexicons of social science, attention could be paid to the disclosive possibilities in, for example, expert terminologies, ethno-psychological vocabularies, poetic registers and narrative structures.

- 4 A theory of affect and emotion invites other political practices and definitions of the political, ones that do not necessarily rely on the 'successful' discursive symbolization of a putative identity as their condition of possibility. Here we are thinking of, for example, the logics of affective intervention enacted through generosity, hospitality, trust, friendship, solidarity, respect or responsibility.

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