

## Suspect Emotions in Social Theory

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### **Abstract**

It is now generally established that social theory can, even should, take into account the social force of emotions and the work that they do in the world. Emphasis so far has been on inauthenticity, victimology, distorting influences in individual and collective relationships, and democracy perverted through emotional demands and claims. But it is one thing to recognize that feelings are implicated in social processes and arrangements and quite another to search out the positive dimensions of what they do. This paper examines some of the ways in which contemporary social theorists have focused on the damage and dangers that may attach to emotions in public life. After inspecting the politics of such critiques I suggest that there is still space for some positive things that feelings might do.

### **(Should We Always) Suspect Emotions in Social Theory?**

Not much of the current academic and popular interest in emotions is positive. Like other people's noisy children, feelings most commonly attract negative attention. It is one thing to recognize that feelings matter in society and quite another to detect beneficial effects. Although many of those engaged in the sociology of emotions examine the ways in which feelings work in public and collective life without directly setting out to judge them, problems are nevertheless quite regularly detected in the ways those feelings are implicated in social arrangements (e.g. Hochschild, 1979; Illouz, 1997; Giddens, 1992). Others, including Meštrović (1996, 1997) and Furedi (2004, 2004, 2007) whose ideas are discussed here, are strongly critical of the ways in which emotions are experienced and deployed in contemporary Western societies. Recognized as significant in social processes yet one way or another often deplored, the emotional dimensions of human existence continue to have a hard time in socio-legal studies, sociology, and cultural studies.<sup>1</sup> I'm interested in why this should be so and I also wonder whether some redeeming virtues might be found for feelings.

Earlier neglect is often attributed to the Enlightenment-fuelled conceptual split between reason and emotion that excluded feelings from 'scientific' inquiry (Barbalet, 1998; Williams, 2001). Presently, and from a sociological perspective at least, feelings are conceived as phenomena generated out of experience, at some level grounded in evolutionary processes while remaining historically and culturally variable in expression. In social and political theory,

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<sup>1</sup> Though not, of course in psychology where for many years they have received close attention through experimental method and quantitative analysis.

they are most notable for their capacity to move individuals, groups, and even whole societies to action. Debates around the relationship between emotion and reason which initially characterized the revisiting of emotions in social life seem to be currently settled, perhaps even permanently resolved, in a compromise. Neurophysiological reports of physiological processes that actually unite reason and senses are paired with social constructivist explanations of the societal, cultural and historical specificities through which feelings are manifested (Barbalet, 1998; West-Newman, 2005). Or, as Williams (2001, p.150) succinctly puts it:

Emotions ... are *emergent* properties, located at the intersection of physiological *dispositions*, material *circumstances*, and socio-cultural *elaboration*.

But new difficulties with feelings have in turn appeared. These also, at times, implicate past assumptions of an inherent and irreconcilable tension between Enlightenment values and the realms of emotion, but they do so in rather different ways. Present discomfort does not necessarily depend on ideas about a perceived presence or absence of cognition in feelings for these, like the order in which physical sensation and intellectual apprehension arise, are now seen as questions that can generate only circular explanations. But apprehension of ‘unreason’, in at least some manifestations and forms of emotion, still hovers over many contemporary discussions. Current difficulties circulate around suspicions of inauthenticity, distorted relationships in contemporary public life and, in consequence, democracy perverted.

I am interested here in exploring questions around the value and effects of particular publicly expressed feelings. The doubts to be examined have been raised by sociologists Stepan Meštrović and Frank Furedi, political theorist Wendy Brown, and cultural analysts Lauren Berlant, Sara Ahmed and Elspeth Probyn. Published under such emotive titles as ‘States of Injury’, ‘Wounded Attachments’, ‘The Subject of True Feeling’, ‘Post-emotional Society’, ‘Culture of Fear’, ‘Therapy Culture’, their critiques constitute a substantial catalogue of disquiet. Although, not surprisingly, the writers have overlapping concerns, their arguments are also focused, explored, and presented through several different disciplinary methods. The order in which I discuss their ideas moves, approximately, from those who make the broadest claims about the current state of emotions in Western societies and social practices to more specific politico-legal issues and eventually some personally focused close readings of individual emotions.

The level of scholarly interest in emotions at any particular time and place will reflect the most current and salient theoretical preoccupations. The present dominance of the ‘cultural turn’ that is visible in sociology, socio-legal studies, and, of course, in cultural studies itself is reflected in the ideas discussed here. It shows up in several ways that help to explain the shape of present debate around the status of feelings in public life. There are, arguably, at least two

different things going on here.<sup>2</sup> First, there is an influential and widespread recognition that, as beings that not only have but *are* bodies, we inevitably have feelings that prompt us to social action and inflect our performance of these acts. Second, as a consequence of this, questions are now raised about the power those feelings may have in politics and public life and, more particularly, their role in situations of social conflict and change. At both levels, feelings, once admitted, are opened up to contestation through interpretations of meaning and implication. They are also available for deployment in competing claims for recognition, often in situations where conflicting interests cannot be reconciled.

The very idea of such a politics of emotions hinges on a view that social life is ‘inherently plastic, capable of being continually remade through lifestyle choices, value-judgments and changing definitions of self-interest which individuals bring to bear on it’ (Nash, 2001, p. 80). Only then, when politics can be conceived as ‘at least potentially an aspect of every activity in social life’ (Nash, 2001, p. 80) can the active implication of feelings in public contestations of power become visible. When this happens, then debates around their role and value in public life will most probably track the recognizable contemporary social and political fault lines of the society in question. In present day societies such politics of emotion will almost inevitably be associated with processes of identity formation and management through the assertion of group claims of injury and entitlement. As in the United States, where there is a history of such claims (see, for example, Williams, 1991; Thomas, 1992) the injuries in question are more often than not the products of gendering, heterosexism, racism, and colonization. It is, in fact, precisely the kinds of recognition currently given to these bearers of group wrongs that, according to one sociologist, demonstrate a worrying change in the social dimensions of feelings.

### **(Over)socialized emotions**

The emotions that Stjepan Meštrović so deeply suspects are, he claims, diagnostic of something seriously amiss in American society.<sup>3</sup> In fact, from his point of view these are not really emotions at all; they are simulacra, they are ‘synthetic, quasi-emotions’ which have ‘become the basis for widespread manipulation by self, others, and the culture industry ...’ (1997, p. xi).

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<sup>2</sup> On a quite different level another politics of emotions is generated between the various disciplines that declare an interest in the field – history, philosophy, political theory, sociology, geography, psychology, neurophysiology, psycho-analytic theory, and more. Each has constructed a vocabulary – feeling, affect, emotion, passion – and sometimes contradictory conventions of meaning and application. Psychology and sociology, for instance, use ‘affect’ to refer to quite different stages in the physiological and cultural processes of ‘having a feeling’.

<sup>3</sup> He tends to write as if this claim extends to Western societies in general but in *Postemotional Society* the argument and evidence are very largely derived from the United States.

Authenticity in emotions ‘presupposes a community’ (1997, p.75) and in the fractioning and fragmentation of identity driven interest groups that populate postmodernity, this becomes increasingly rare. It is replaced by the ‘postemotional tendency to seek a perfectly manipulated community, complete with artificial emotions’ (1997, p. 76). Under Disneyfication – both literal and metaphorical – ‘artificial emotional experiences’ are consumed in commercially constituted groups that exist as such only for the purpose and duration of the experience.

Ironically, in this account the only groups credited with a more durable sense of community and common purpose are in fact precisely those whose existence is for Meštrović both symptom and source of emotional inauthenticity. That is, those minority groups whose claims about injuries of gender, heterosexism, racism, and colonization are both cause and consequence of what he most deplors; a moment beyond modernism and postmodernism – an era of ‘postemotionalism’ when ‘emotionally charged collective representations [are] abstracted from their cultural contexts’ and ‘manipulated artificially’ in ‘new and artificially contrived contexts’ (1997, p.1). These quasi emotions, most often in the form of ‘curdled indignation’ and ‘carefully managed niceness’, replace real feelings in the national psyche. Blame for this condition is largely laid upon those groups who, in his terms, claim a monopoly of victimhood as their ground for demanding special rights, not available to other citizens. Attributions of collective majority guilt are deployed to rationalize their claim and the resulting ‘inauthentic’ quasi-emotion supplants the genuine feelings of anger and despair that previously characterized healthy social life.

Apart from apparently holding ‘victims’ broadly responsible for this deplorable condition Meštrović is not entirely clear why the change has come about. He suggests that modernity’s rationalizing tendency (or at least the version exemplified and described in Ritzer’s McDonaldisation thesis) has extended to emotions, intellectualizing and bureaucratizing them to the point where only ‘dead emotions from the past’ remain to be endlessly recycled through claims of historical injury. The process is likened to a failure of life-force, the absence of vitality. In this framing ‘postemotionalism’ is both a social and individual state and an explanatory theory of that state:

Postemotionalism holds that contemporary emotions are ‘dead’ in the analogous senses that one speaks of a dead current versus a ‘live wire’, or a ‘dead nerve’ in a limb or tooth. The current is still on, the nerve is still present anatomically, but neither is functioning as it was supposed to (1998, p. 62).

The consequence is an exhaustion of all feelings – positive and negative – and their reconstitution in degraded versions that are innately harmful.

Anger becomes indignation. Envy – in the form of the traditional covetousness of a neighbor’s cow, children, wife, or whatever – now becomes an objectless craving for

something better. Hate is transformed into a subtle malice that is hidden in all sorts of intellectualizations. Heartfelt joy is now the bland happiness represented by the 'happy meal'. Loving really becomes liking (1998, p. 62).

Passing lightly over the patriarchal viewpoint evinced in the catalogue of covetable things, we now come to the only clearly identified agent in all this.

Sorrow, as the manifestation of affliction, anguish, grief, pain, remorse, trials, tribulations, and sadness, is magically transformed by the TV journalist's question 'How do you feel?' ... into 'I'm very upset' (1998, pp. 62-3).

It is perhaps helpful here to look at Meštrović's reasons, summarized in *Genocide After Emotion: The Postemotional Balkan War*, for adopting this position.

... I propose that postemotionalism ought to be regarded as a new theoretical construct to capture the fission, Balkanization, ethnic violence and other highly *emotional* phenomena of the late 1990s (1996, p. 26).

He identifies this as the most recent phase in an historically contextualised sequence in which critical theory responded to the 'horrors of modernism exemplified by Stalin and Hitler' and postmodernism anticipated 'the collapse of the modernist system in Communism' and reacted to 'the last stages of modernist capitalism'. But it is still not clear to me why, even if all this were so, that 'false' feelings should so effectively have supplanted the authentic anger, anguish, grief, joy, love whose passing he announces and mourns. Is it perhaps that Meštrović has simply co-opted a particularly blunt version of the thesis that ordinary citizens, as audiences, are media dopes (and dupes)? Whether or not I am right about this, I do understand his broader claim, framed in Veblen's terminology, that the dead emotions which currently circulate through consumption-driven media channels are 'almost always *vicarious* and *conspicuous* and are treated as objects to be *consumed*' (1997, p. 62). Presumably, then, no 'live' emotions remain to contest the field with these colonized, 'socially transformed', parodies of genuine feelings.

Interestingly, the concerns of his position are a mirror image of those writers (still to be discussed) who fear that emotional appeals weaken the claims of minority interests. Meštrović is effectively arguing that while (presumably inauthentic) emotional expressions made by minority interests are deployed to strengthen their claims for special treatment such claims simultaneously debilitate and colonize the field of genuine feeling. But why should their feelings of grief, loss, shame, and pain, not be real? Are all responses to wounding necessarily suspect? Does this mean that suffering should not be a ground for claiming rights and/or justice?<sup>4</sup> It is an interesting idea but one which might be more convincing if his examples of

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<sup>4</sup> This is particularly interesting in the light of Bryan Turner's (1993) sociological argument for grounding human rights claims in the vulnerability and frailties of being human.

damage done did not so clearly reveal the politics of his position; that feelings were more authentic when the victims he identifies here did not press their claims but rather ‘suffered in silence’:

This was especially true of children, who, if unfortunate enough to suffer parental abuse or disease or hazing from peers, took their calamity as if it were the order of nature. (1997, p. 15).

Nor were people so prone to take offence, and where they did then insults were met with socially appropriate and acceptable anger:

Historically, people did not get as indignant over as many things as so many contemporaries do. ... It is quite another matter when people today feel victimized by a look, word, phrase, or touch based on the subjective interpretation of the alleged victimizer’s motive and on the synthetic construction of their victimhood status as based on membership in a specific group deemed to be a victim. The resulting indignation by victims is often manipulative ... (1997, p. 15).

Although I am not sympathetic to his style of argument here or to his examples, it is worth noting that his next observation is similar to that of Wendy Brown (considered in the next section), that investment in victimhood, whatever the purpose, breeds resentment that affords no relief to those who bear it. This may be his point, that the harm of emotion here lies in the fact that victim resentment superimposes itself to obliterate its own causes. Still somehow I don’t quite believe that the wellbeing of these groups is his primary concern. Politically speaking, of course, suppressed and silent suffering whether in children or in adults will, unless someone addresses their wrongs, linger unassuaged. Among a myriad of possible examples, the accounts of extended suffering currently voiced by middle aged victims of priestly paedophilia in numerous countries stand out particularly.

The other sociologist who interests me here explores neither victimhood nor power in relation to emotions, but he does detect and prophesize substantial social and individual damage produced through feelings. Frank Furedi reports a growing tendency for individuals, groups and governments to engage with the world through strategies of risk avoidance. The social significance of cultural constructions of risk has had considerable recognition since the early 1990s (see for example Beck, 1992; O’Malley, 2004) and the associated connection with social fears has been widely recognized. Furedi, however, elevates it to the dominant cultural trope of millennial human consciousness. He finds contemporary western society to be dominated by a ‘culture of fear’ whose ‘defining feature ... is the belief that humanity is confronted by powerful destructive forces that threaten our everyday existence’ (2005, p. vii). In several books and articles dedicated to a detailed examination of its defining symptoms and signs, Furedi clearly

writes his acute distrust of fear, or at least of the uses to which fear is currently put. The fearfulness that he detects and whose causes and consequences he diagnoses manifests less in terror and panic than in a kind of low grade, niggling anxiety that leads individuals and institutions to pursue multiple risk detection and avoidance practices. Nor is this fear randomly generated; instead Furedi believes that ‘scaremongering is increasingly represented as the act of a concerned and responsible citizen’ (2005, p. viii). Encouraged by governments, officials, and experts we tell each other scary stories and society itself is obsessed with safety in ways that change both social arrangements and individual lives.

This generalized distrust of fear does not, for Furedi, extend to other emotions, though. On the contrary, fear is accused of muting ‘passions that were once devoted to a struggle to change the world’ (2005, p. 1). Reason, in the form of technical solutions for risk avoidance problems, could even be seen as the ultimate result of fear in postmodern society. Fear, by implication, then becomes the bad emotion that drives out all other (good) ones. In a recent article Furedi compares representations of severe floods in Britain in the 1950s and in 2000 to detect a significant change in the stories told by people caught in the floods and reported in the media. On this basis he builds an argument claiming a qualitative shift over time in the cultural expectations through which experiences of disaster and personal misfortune are perceived by both participants and observers.

In the mid-twentieth century these stories were about community and collective resilience with echoes of the ‘spirit of the blitz’; now they tell of individual vulnerability and distress. In the meantime, he argues, ‘a cultural narrative of adversity has evolved’. Three elements are implicated in the change: media and public representations of people coping with disaster, individuals’ real life testimonies, and the style adopted in sociological studies of disaster. Overall, he claims, these reveal a changing attribution of meaning to misfortune and pain. Themes of collective fortitude have given way to a rhetoric of vulnerability, loss, and unreason. Furedi believes that people do not ‘naturally’ label themselves as vulnerable, but will, nevertheless, after professionals have applied the description to their communities, characterize themselves in terms of their individual distress. Vulnerability in this sense becomes an ‘intrinsic predisposition to be affected, or to be susceptible to damage’ and the experience is located in social group membership. Under the all-embracing rubric of risk analysts:

vulnerability represents the physical, economic, political or social susceptibility or predisposition of a community to damage in the case of a destabilizing phenomenon of natural or anthropogenic origin (Cardona, 2004, p.37).

Named ‘identity-groups’ become marked as collectively vulnerable assemblages – children, women, minorities, the elderly, the disabled, the poor. Attributions of trauma and

traumatization that were initially applied to experiences of misfortune by officials, experts, and the media have, Furedi claims, become internalized by people who come to see themselves as suffering victims of long term damage from disastrous events. Gradually, then, as individuals came to feel more vulnerable, more at risk of danger from environmental and human sources, fear became part of the appropriate British response; the 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1978) for disaster and misfortune. In contemporary Britain issues of risk, trust, threat, abuse claims, and public panic all are regularly generated in the suspicious climate of fear that Furedi discerns.

Furedi and Meštrović have quite a lot in common. Both argue passionately, but not always clearly, about the deleterious effects of emotional distortions in contemporary life. Both indict the media as complicit in and intensely productive of the undesirable changes they perceive in the way people feel (or don't feel) and how they are emotionally shaped by external media; trained in what (and what not) to feel. And, finally, both have been criticized for their scattergun style of argumentation and a selective and anecdotal approach to evidence.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless they have also been recognized for raising pertinent and timely issues and their work continues to be widely cited. They have perhaps been more effective as public intellectuals who generate scholarly and popular debate than as authors of incisive sociological critique, but they also raise questions that deserve more in depth sociological consideration. Somewhat embarrassingly, from a disciplinary point of view, analysis of precisely this sort is available in the work of the next two writers, neither of whom are in fact sociologists.

### **The ideological usefulness of feelings**

Distrust of feelings pervades the broad brush sociological analyses of Meštrović and Furedi. It also characterizes the treatment of emotions in the more precisely focused socio-legal/socio-political commentaries of Lauren Berlant and Wendy Brown. Quite disparate critiques, then, are linked through a shared apprehension that dangerously out of control emotions which generate climates of feeling are, or may be, inimical to egalitarian, just, or even compassionate social arrangements. Or, put another way, such feelings may undo that reason which is the necessary and sufficient bedrock for human rights discourse. Assertions and claims of feelings, it is said, may by implication and by explicit statement, dangerously undermine the necessary conditions for a good society.

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<sup>5</sup> For a compelling example of how this might be done see how Mike Davis, in *Ecology of Fear*, dissects the circulation of fear in Southern California in an amplifying loop through environmental conditions, class differences, and political power. Treating fear as in itself neither good nor bad, he shows the shape, causes and consequences of its social and political-economic distribution.

Wendy Brown (1995), describing the dangers of what she calls ‘wounded attachments’, deplores a fetishising of the wound that she argues has come to characterize identity politics in the United States. She constructs a normative argument that the use of identity claims ‘to replace Liberalism’s abstract formulation of equality with legal recognition of injurious social stratifications’ (1995, p. 21) can be dangerous and damaging for the intended beneficiaries.<sup>6</sup> Such identities once inscribed in legal discourse, no matter what their purpose, ‘have the effect of reaffirming the historical injuries constitutive of those identities, thus installing injury as identity in the ahistorical discourse of the law ...’ (1995, p. xi). Powerlessness, codified into law, cements in a culture of resentment and installs ‘a politics of recrimination and rancor, of culturally dispersed paralysis and suffering, a tendency to reproach power rather than aspire to it’ (1995, p. 55). Resentment, she describes as a ‘triple achievement’, producing affect in righteousness and rage, a culprit to blame for the hurt, and a site of revenge (p. 68). An identity politics so constructed is capable only of reversing the blaming structure; it can neither critique nor subvert (p. 70).

While Brown suspects resentment, Lauren Berlant (2000, 2001, 2004) is dubious about the increasing public expression of easy sympathy for others’ pain. One strand of her writing has been devoted to anatomizing what she calls ‘national sentimentality’ in the United States; another explores ‘liberalism’s traffic in the democratizing rhetoric of pain/trauma’.<sup>7</sup> At the heart of her critique, if I read her right, lies the perception that public recognition of emotional injuries done to members of groups who are or have been subjected to unequal treatment ultimately individualizes them in their suffering. Since collective accountability and state reparation are not necessarily involved, public sympathy for victims can be cheap and quite probably insincere. In the United States such ‘national sentimentality’, she argues, serves as a nation-building ‘liberal rhetoric of promise’ through affirmation that social difference can be bridged through ‘channels of affective identification and empathy’ (Berlant 2000, p. 34). More importantly, such essentially meaningless sentiment deflects attention from the structural dimensions and origins of the collective social disadvantage that its objects endure. In this she reiterates Brown’s point that the politics of such emotions are inherently regressive, conceding to dominant power and concentrating/ expending energy where it is least likely to produce change.

Brown argues that rhetoric of empowerment is ‘in its almost exclusive focus on subjects’ emotional bearing and self-regard, ... a formulation that converges with a regime’s

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<sup>6</sup> She describes herself as writing not ‘normative political theory’ but ‘political theoretical critique’ that makes ‘no pretense at being free of normative impulses’ (Brown, 1995, p. 3).

<sup>7</sup> These phrases come from Berlant’s self-description in ‘Trauma and Ineloquence’ (2001, p.58).

own legitimacy needs in masking the power of the regime' (1995, p.23). Just such a masking is achieved through the legal system, and more specifically the judicial process, in Berlant's example of *Griswold v Connecticut* where the Supreme Court justices, by striking down a law making it illegal for married couples to use contraceptives, gave sexual privacy to United States heterosexual couples by way of the sentimental reason the Court adopted.

Would we allow the police to search the sacred precincts of marital bedrooms for telltale signs of the use of contraceptives? ... Marriage is a coming together for better or for worse, hopefully enduring, and intimate to the degree of being sacred. (Justice William O Douglas in *Griswold v Connecticut* in Berlant, 2000, p. 38)

This is, Berlant argues, 'heteronormative Hallmark-style sentiment', and like Justice Hugo Black in his dissenting opinion, she deplores the 'emotionality' of Douglas's position. Her point is, of course, that this overflow of benevolent concern is accorded only to heterosexual married couples; elsewhere in the decision Douglas specifically excludes this privacy for situations of State-forbidden sexual intimacy in 'adultery, homosexuality, and the like'.

Berlant's subsequent discussion in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* continues this theme of emotions selectively co-opted for ideological purposes. She points out that when it is seen not as an abstract virtue but as '*an emotion in operation*' then compassion is 'a term denoting privilege: the sufferer is *over there*' (2004, p. 4 italics in original). Questions then arise about appropriate action in response to an 'obligation to recognize and alleviate suffering' in a world where:

members of mass society witness suffering not just in concretely local spaces but in the elsewheres [sic] brought home and made intimate by sensationalist media, where documentary realness about the pain of strangers is increasingly at the center of both fictional and nonfictional events (2004, p. 5).

Both Berlant and Brown are clear that their commentaries are grounded in the specifics of American issues and debates. They argue for a reinvigoration of those 'Good Society' welfare state values now lost in the dominant Republican discourse of conservative compassion. And Berlant (2004, p. 5), in particular, is aware that critique of the uses of particular feelings for less than ethically desirable reasons will also seem to denigrate such positive 'humanizing emotions' as compassion, empathy and love. She does not, however, attempt a solution for this dilemma.

### **Discovering how it feels**

Cultural scholars have a particular skill in exploring specified emotions, separating them out from a more generalized flow of feelings and frequently excavating personal experience to expand into political and social critique. Probing at collective social scar tissue through reflecting on 'how it feels' has served in several recent books to support demands for greater

accountability in public and private agents of injustice – especially in relation to the field of law. The strategy, practiced most particularly in connection with states of shame and grief, has exposed and challenged some of the more ugly dimensions of national psyches and sometimes the associated misdoings of key political actors. Australia through the eyes of newer arrivals has been particularly productive in this regard (see for example the work of Ahmed, 2004; Probyn, 2005; Povinelli, 1998). More positively, at least one of these writers has even suggested a conception of feelings that might, under certain circumstances, have the power if not to heal historical wounds, then to ameliorate residual pain.

Sara Ahmed (2004), in a series of essays that investigate political cultures of hate, pain, fear, disgust, shame, and love, speculates productively but seldom positively about what emotions do in the world. She sees the ‘politics of emotion’ as negative and damaging of individuals, groups, and collectivities – especially of subordinate groups and minorities whose feelings are suppressed by majority defined norms of acceptable and unacceptable expression, and appropriated affect. Her examples are cautionary tales of feelings misplaced – the love of the Aryan Nation for whiteness, and of the patriot who suspects the feelings of strangers and others. She is critical of the ways in which emotions are rhetorically effective in deployment against outsiders. Calls to rejection and exclusion of ‘illegal immigrants’, ‘bogus asylum seekers’, illegitimate others, all work by inciting fear and through the factious love claims of patriotism.

In a rapid double move, emotions are suspect also through an historical association with women in a reflexive denigration of both. Civilization, equated with a capacity appropriately to express or control emotions (Elias, 1978), has made their management a tool that secures social hierarchy. Attributions of emotionality adhere, Ahmed says, to some bodies but not others. In essays shaped around feelings of pain, hate, fear, disgust, shame, and love she describes how such emotions attach to subjugated groups in ways that aggravate their members’ lack of power; that is, she looks for ‘the work that [each emotion] does’ (2004, p. 14). And the imprints on bodies that she perceives are never happy ones. It is not emotions as such that Ahmed, like other writers discussed here, suspects but rather the ends which their use may secure. Reinforcing divisions, they create the very effect of an inside and an outside as they become part of how ‘we become invested in social norms’ (2004, p. 12). Ultimately, though, Ahmed’s demonstration of emotions as a form of world-making is about damage to those individuals and collectivities – especially minorities, whose own emotions are so frequently subordinated to dominant constructions of social meaning and value.

## **What might emotions do?**

In various ways the writers considered here offer glimpses of feelings as potential tools for the interests of the powerful against those of the powerless, majorities against minorities, the strong over the weak, the influential (politicians and media) over those without access to the means of influence (ordinary citizens). This is implicit in the work of Meštrović and Furedi and explicit in that of Brown, Berlant, and Ahmed, but in each case there is a sense that emotions let loose will sooner or later betray a (presumably democratic) ‘us’ and ‘our’ ideals.

But are there ways to see this differently? I want to conclude by suggesting, very briefly, some of the socially desirable things that emotions, properly attended to, might do. New Zealand poet, novelist, and critic, C.K. Stead (2008, p. 81) says of his involvement in the Vietnam War protests that:

[s]o much was going on at an emotional level one was very largely relieved of the burden of reason; and, however dangerous such a state may be, it has, as well as force, its own kind of purity.

He recollects a time of horror but also of ‘a compensating excitement’. The notion that intense emotion experienced over ethically problematic social events may not only be dangerously powerful but also have a force and purity of its own has been evident in many movements for social and political change. Anger, for instance, when transformed into acts of civil disobedience in civil rights and anti-war movements has helped to disrupt and even overturn oppressive structural arrangements sustaining deeply ingrained injustices. Lyman (2004) points out that there is a direct connection between the recovery of silenced or unconscious anger and the effective finding of voice through political movements. In this sense, anger directed in service of a moral cause might actually displace the resentment and curdled indignation that troubles Meštrović’s and Brown, replacing impotence with action and change.

The very existence of social movements demonstrates – literally and evidentially – the kind of interest that triggers and accompanies emotions (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta, 2001). In earlier papers I have argued that emotional encounters in settler societies mark the fault lines in relations between governments and indigenous minorities (West-Newman 2004; 2008). They signal that something needs to be done and, given serious attention, may contribute to substantive change. Arguably, without the anger-fuelled Maori activism of the 1970s, the Waitangi Tribunal would not have existed in its present form and the socio-economic base of Maori society would not have been strengthened by substantial treaty settlements.

The benefit of taking anger seriously is that listening to those who feel they have lost their right to be heard reduces social suffering, enriches political dialogue, and enhances the ability of politics to redress injustice (Lyman, 2004, p. 133)

Conversely, when governments see and feel popular emotional arousal and yet choose quick legalistic solutions over inclusive political dialogue then opportunities for positive outcomes are lost. The Maori-Government standoff over ownership of the foreshore and seabed in 2004 is an example of precisely the latter situation (West-Newman, 2008).

In *Blush* Elspeth Probyn (2005) reveals intimate and personal reflections on shame to open the way for some broader reflections on the work that shame does or might do in a series of situations. Like Ahmed, Brown, and Berlant, she is concerned that issues of justice not be reduced to (simply) feelings, but unlike them, she also finds redemptive qualities for her chosen emotion – shame – for its properties and potential in some of the ways it sometimes connects us to each other.

In shame, the feeling and minding and thinking body and social body comes alive. It's in this sense that shame is positive and productive, even or especially when it feels bad.

The feeling of shame teaches us about our relations to others (Probyn, 2005, p. 34-5).

The most telling example of what she means lies in her engagement with the emotionally fraught relations that many white Australians have with the history of settler-indigenous relations and its consequences for Aboriginal people. Drawing on her own feelings of complicity, guilt and shame as a Canadian beneficiary of Australian white privilege, Probyn suggests that emotions are useful guides to what is morally and socially required for a just and compassionate society. So, while she recognizes that feelings do not necessarily make people do what is just, she also comprehends that, given proper attention, they may lead governments to do the right thing.

Compassion, sympathy, and empathy are frequently indicted as emotions that have been particularly susceptible to appropriation in rhetorical claims of feeling for less than admirable political purposes. Political leaders Clinton and Blair are still critically cited as exemplars of the shameless and insincere ways in which popular feeling can be more or less successfully manipulated. But these are pretty much the same feelings that Bryan Turner looks to as a sustainable foundation for universalizing human rights claims on a global scale. His argument, much abbreviated, is that all human beings relate to the world through their personal and individual embodiment. The commonality of this experience then forms a ground for shared understanding of what it means to suffer and a social consensus against tolerating human suffering for 'while there is a diversity of happiness, there is a unity of human misery' (Turner, 2006, p. 22) that 'transcends and unites different cultures and historical epochs' (Moore, 1970, p.11 in Turner, p. 23).

Vulnerability, suffering, and sympathy are shared human experiences. As individuals we are ontologically vulnerable through 'an organic propensity to disease and sickness'

(Turner, 2006, p. 29), destined for the frailties of old age and the inevitability of death. Inhabiting a natural environment that is uncertain and largely uncontrollable, where ‘the mass of the world’s population lives under circumstances of scarcity’ (Turner, 1993, p. 501) the societies and social institutions we build for mutual protection are frequently fallible and sometimes even dangerous. Under such precarious conditions trust, friendship, sympathy, and empathy make society possible; mutual recognition, respect, and compassion are a moral imperative. Through collective sympathy human and social rights are institutionalized in a ‘juridical expression of social solidarity, whose foundations rest in the common experience of vulnerability and precariousness’ (2006, pp. 26-7).

The concept of vulnerability comes from *vulnus*, the Latin word for wound. Where Brown and Meštrović found only negative social outcomes attached to recognition and redress for specific claims to wounding, Turner sees a foundational use for the universal human propensity to be vulnerable, susceptible to wounds. Since Brown’s problem with (fetishised) wounds lies at least partly in the potential for an individualizing of injury and undermining collective responsibility and response, Turner’s purpose for recognizing vulnerability as a universal phenomenon – to constitute an ontological ground for human rights – might be unobjectionable. But for Furedi, who claims that fear of risk and danger have been over recognized in the contemporary world, Turner’s appeal for more, not less, attention to human frailty and to its consequences will have little appeal.

Turner is suggesting a basis on which all members of ‘global political communities’ may recognize a mutual ‘duty of care and stewardship’ to guide the multicultural interactions that constitute the modern world. He is arguing for attention to the emotions that conduce to shared understanding through sympathy and a desire for recognition and respect for others. The alternative future of our irretrievably multi-cultural world, he predicts, will most likely take the form of ‘a vicious cycle of ethnic conflict, revenge, and retribution’ (2006, p. 24). Recognizing the role played by certain emotions in the sociality of human beings, Turner believes that, properly nurtured, these might sustain a structure of realisable human rights appropriate for the ethical future of a multicultural world.

The critics discussed here suspect the harm that emotions, improperly controlled or directed, might do; the ends to which they have been and might be directed; the chaos that, untamed, they might effect. But none argue that feelings are sociologically irrelevant or without interest. Among the interpretations considered, only Turner finds an entirely positive place for feelings and in his argument their role is ultimately to sustain a structure of human rights to counter the damage that unconstrained anger, retribution, and revenge do to individuals and societies. It may be that, as Solomon (2004) has argued, there are no innately good or bad

emotions; it all depends on context and intent. If so, then there is every reason to suspect emotions, not to discount them but rather to question, explore, and ultimately to see more clearly the complexity and significance of the work they do in the social world.

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