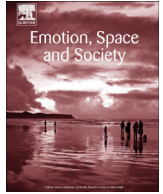




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Book review

Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding, Margaret Wetherell. Sage, London (2012). 182 pp. \$37.68 paperback, ISBN: 978-0-85702-856-3

While by now it is widely recognized that “[e]motions are a vital ingredient in the very composition of the world as a world” (Smith et al., 2009: p. 2), little effort has been made to systematically review the different strands of work that have informed the affective turn in the human and social sciences. The merit of Margaret Wetherell’s work lies in filling this gap with an expansive and critical review of this fast growing body of literature. For sure, Wetherell’s is a “must read” for students of all levels and experienced scholars in the field alike that should not be missing in one’s bookshelf. The book succeeds in outlining the main debates around affect in the social sciences. Her book can be considered an impressive “guided tour of the field from a highly interested spectator with her own views on [central] thinkers” (p. 25) through six main chapters where she engages in each with a different set of theorists ranging from neuroscience (Chapter 2), to non-representational theories and cultural history (Chapter 3), ‘ethnoscience’ (Chapter 4), sociology (Chapter 5), psychoanalysis (Chapter 6) to cultural studies (Chapter 7).

Wetherell, however, does not stop short in portraying the field of affect. Her critical engagement with what she identifies as ‘wrong turns’ sheds new light on contemporary controversies between non-representational and feminist approaches around the differences and similarities between affect and emotion (McCormack, 2006; Pile, 2010; Thien, 2005), discourse and affect (Anderson and Harrison, 2006, 2010; Dewsbury, 2010; Thrift, 2008) as well as consciousness and unconsciousness (Damasio, 2000; Korf, 2012; Papoulias and Callard, 2010). From her background in social psychology and discourse theory, she challenges these separations through proposing a new approach that understands affects as affective practices. Outlining that “an affective practice is a figuration where body possibilities and routines become recruited or entangled together with meaning-making and with other social and material figurations” (p. 19), she calls for the need to go beyond the “rubbishing of discourse” (p. 19) currently en vogue in cultural and non-representational theory. Wetherell argues that the distinctions made in non-representational and affective theory between affect as the domain of the unconscious, the automatic and the unplanned and discourse as the domain of the deliberate, the cognitive and the conscious are misleading. Drawing on insights from psychology and neuroscience, she shows that affect rather needs to be understood as a “dynamic, interacting composite or assemblage of autonomic bodily responses (e.g. sweating, trembling, blushing), other body actions (approaching or avoiding), subjective feelings and other qualia, cognitive processing (e.g. perception, attention, memory, decision-making), the firing and projecting of neural circuits (e.g. from the thalamus to the cortex and the amygdala), verbal reports (from

exclamations to narratives) and communicative signals such as facial expressions” (p. 62). The concept of affective practices offers in her view the potential to take into account the hybrid nature of affective life.

Her book is a plea for refocusing attention on the affective lives of humans and the need to bring back the subject in(to) studies of affect (p. 125). She is rather critical about an actor-network theory-inspired perspective dominating affective studies and NRT that gives the affective capacity of non-human actors the same kind of attention as human feelings when she writes: “research on affect in cultural studies is often obfuscating when it elides altogether affect as topic (the study of emotion) with affect defined as becoming and intensity so that sunsets, iron filings, talking parrots, financial meltdowns, earthquakes, sobbing Englishmen, angry Libyans, etc., are studied under the same rubric” (p. 4). Her call to (re) turn to human emotions rather than to the affective forces of non-human matter is echoed in feminist geography when Thien (2005: p. 453) pleads for refocusing research on “[human] everyday emotional lives”.

For sure, from a feminist point of view, one needs to applaud Wetherell for the convincing arguments she makes against separating discourse and affect or privileging the unconscious over the conscious. There are, nevertheless, three reservations I would like to raise. First, in dismissing non-representational theories’ focus on non-human agents, Wetherell forecloses a critical feminist engagement with the affective circulations between human and non-human actors. Assisted reproductive technologies and their effects on procreation are just one among many examples where such a perspective is crucial. Donna Haraway’s (1991) early engagement with the cyborgization of everyday life can serve as an inspiring example to develop a feminist approach to the more-than-human nature of affective life. Second, I felt uneasy with Wetherell’s conceptualization of practice. In her “Note on Practice” (pp. 22–25) she states that she draws on an ‘eclectic’ concept of practice building on what seems to be the whole cosmos of practice theorists ranging from Bourdieu to Butler and Deleuze and Schatzki. This eclecticism and the lack of any clear demarcation of her understanding of practice throughout the book leave the reader somehow theoretically clueless. This lack of clarity risks that practice substitutes affect as a somehow vague concept that encompasses everything and nothing. Third, one is left wondering how Wetherell would methodologically redeem her concept of affective practices. While she draws on and criticizes empirical examples from the work she cites for its methodological shortcomings, one somehow waits for the happy end, for some kind of guidance regarding the empirical investigation of affective practices. One can just hope that Wetherell will complement this first volume, which does a great job at systematizing different theoretical approaches, with a second volume that engages with methodological issues surrounding research in social science on emotions and affects.

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