

## The affective life of power

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*Encountering Affect*, through its emphasis on the organisation, taking place and mediation of affective life, offers a refreshing contribution to scholarship on affect. Anderson's invocation of what he calls "a different Foucault" is, I feel, one of the most important theoretical and methodological contributions to this work, highlighting how the affective capacities of bodies and the conditions through which experience is produced are central to the workings of power. *Encountering Affect* models how Foucauldian techniques of analysis that pay attention to the conditions of possibility of forms of affective life can provide a clear framework for investigating the work that these forms do through three framings: affect as bodily capacity, as object target and as collective atmosphere.

In contrast to much scholarship on affect (my own included) this book refuses to enter into exhausting and often unproductive debates about what "affect" is, or to make any ontological claims about affect, enabling us to move swiftly on to thinking about affect scholarship as a critical mode of attunement. Rather than beginning with a theory of affect and then trying to pin it down in the world, then, this approach involves an analytic of articulations and arrangements. Through a focus on attunement, Anderson positions affect as a mode of relating to social science research, a mode that opens up different problematics, such as: what happens when we ask questions related to bodies, experience, capacities, conditions and atmospheres? What do these terms attune to, and make visible? In doing so he provides a way out of the impasse of definition and gains ingress into the work that the concept of affect actually does.

Affect scholarship becomes thus positioned as a way of opening out our understanding of the social and also social enquiry: of considering the world through a set of conceptual lenses that make visible flows of augmentation and diminishment, of atmosphere and movement, and enables us to consider these flows as constitutive of forms of life that are always and unavoidably part of the workings of power and of the social. The key is in this one short sentence: "forms of power work through affective life" (8).

*Encountering Affect* refuses to privilege thinking about affect in terms of its excessiveness to contemporary discursive and representational regimes. It is vitally important that work on affect does not only highlight those glimpses or possibilities of escape from forms of power through foregrounding the excessive nature of affect that can push at the limits of experience, at the detriment of understanding how affect relates to power. The organisation of affective life is, as Anderson rightly and necessarily points out, central to the workings of power, and moreover this is not a new phenomenon – affect is one of the central ways in which power grips us. Affective forms of life in this analysis are thus reincorporated as part of relations of power and counter power, rather than inhabiting some ungraspable space outside of capture or representation.

This is a significant move, and opens up new ways of thinking about those glimpses of other worlds that reveal themselves in moments of affective intensity: I hope that we can begin to recognise them not just as emancipatory possibility, but in terms of how they might actually play a role in keeping us

where we are – something Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* brilliantly elucidates (Berlant 2011). These glimpses can actually form part of an organising of affective capacities that sustain our attachments to forms of life that close down rather than open up possibility.

I will now discuss three themes from *Encountering Affect* which translate to broad questions. The first concerns the “not newness” of the sorts of questions that affect scholarship asks. One aspect of the book that I find interesting, and particularly welcome, is a revisiting of some concepts and problematics discussed by scholars from the British cultural studies tradition such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. In particular, the concept of structure of feeling in Williams’ *Marxism and Literature* is discussed at length in chapter 5 as a way of thinking about how affect is organised.

Thinkers from that tradition problematised the domain of culture as a way of understanding the relationships between lived experience and material life. It has always been my hunch that those of us who are interested in the relationship between affect, power and experience – in the way that affects can operate in the service of power while at the same time appearing as independent from power – are asking very similar questions to those cultural Marxists in the 1970s and 80s. And the concept of structure of feeling, as nebulous and vaguely articulated as it is, is something which tries to get to some of the ways in which the structural and the somatic meet. My question, then, refers to revisiting the classic texts of cultural studies in the light of recent “materialist” work on affect, as a distinct process and attitude towards critique and enquiry, and how the politics of this practice is articulated. In *Encountering Affect*, the centrality of class and the concept of ideology are conspicuously absent, as are the forms of left wing political vision and praxis that underpinned the scholarship of Williams and Hall. I wonder what is lost and what is gained when these techniques and concepts are allowed to drift away from the anchor of historical materialism, and how this refigures the practice of critique.

My second point concerns the body. In this book it seems as though a conscious effort is made to move away from work on affect that incorporates neuroscience and medical science as a means of foregrounding the non-representational aspect of affect, or even its ontological primacy<sup>1</sup> (see Papoulias and Callard 2010; Leys 2011; Libet 1996, Damasio 2000; Massumi 2002). These arguments, when read naïvely, position the natural sciences as the unquestionable authority with which to “prove” our theoretical and social scientific endeavours. I am, however, concerned about what the elision of the body in *Encountering Affect*. I wonder whether, in Anderson’s concern to “avoid privileging the incessant dynamism of non-conscious bodily matter,” he pushes the ways in which the transpersonal movement of affect makes itself known in body too far to the sidelines? The authority that we give to “gut feelings” positions them as standing somehow outside of the workings of power, yet these feelings are central to the work of affect, to the ways in which bodies and their capacities to be affected are organised, dealt with and governed. I wonder whether Anderson’s attunements could find a way to reintroduce the embodied activity of affect – the shortening of breath, the release of endorphins, or serotonin, or cortisol, the tightening of the gut, as a way of thinking through the contingency of such activity and how its association with “authentic” experience actually renders more powerful those rationalities that produce affective bodies and forms of life.

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<sup>1</sup> A classic example of this is in discussions of the “half-second rule” where the body’s autonomic system reacts, for example to fear, prior to the subjective register.

A third theme is translation and scale. Rather than focusing on the micropolitics of the encounter, as much work on affect does, this volume considers the workings of the organisation of affective life at different levels, for example the apparatuses of power that place morale as an object-target in tactics of total war, the versions of “debility, dependency, dread” as an identifiable affective state that became an object-target in techniques of interrogation.

It would be interesting to extend this through exploring the movement of affect between atmospheric spaces: how the technologies that produce particular forms of affective life have knock-on effects that may not be immediately visible when one focuses only on one set of articulations. To me, one of the most exciting aspects of thinking about affect in the service of critique is in its making visible the “bleeding” of material effects into different spaces. This can draw our attention to the knock-on effects of macro-level change, for example, ‘austerity’ measures or deindustrialisation. Intensities can translate and redirect: the frustrations that emerge from an intensification and precarisation of work, for example, might make themselves known and felt differently through domestic and other spaces. If we look for one formation of affective life, across different spaces and scales, we may miss the way in which the flows of intensities produced might actually turn into something quite different, and as a result go unnoticed. So while the genealogical tracing of versions of affective life is absolutely critical to understanding affect, I wonder too if we need to develop ways of paying attention to these translations, and picking at those histories that produce the possibility and substance of encounters or atmospheres.

This book both contributes to and highlights the needs for new methodological approaches and techniques for sensitising ourselves to the production – and movement - of forms of affective life. The three framings in this volume will no doubt prove incredibly useful for thinking about how we might investigate and develop methodologies that attend to such forms.

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