



The Cultural Politics of Emotion

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In *The Cultural Politics of the Emotions*, Sara Ahmed develops a new methodology for reading "the emotionality of texts." She offers analyses of the role of emotions in debates on international terrorism, asylum and migration, and reconciliation and reparation, and reflects on the role of emotions in feminist and queer politics. Of interest to readers in gender studies and cultural studies, the psychology and sociology of emotions, and phenomenology and psychoanalysis, *The Cultural Politics of the Emotions* offers new ways of thinking about our inner and our outer lives.

The Cultural Politics of Emotion Details

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From Reader Review The Cultural Politics of Emotion for online ebook

Frank Cernik says

The premise of this book is that the distinction between sensations and emotions is necessarily analytic and therefore a requirement rather than a finding. Emotions are better described, rather, as impressions, the effects of surfaces on each other. As impressions, encounters involve the co-constitution of emotions and objects: emotions are about objects and shape them, and are also shaped by encounters with objects.

Emotions are produced through a certain in-betweenness, where they reach from the encounter to each of the entities of that encounter, but are then assigned by each entity to another entity: In my encounter with a bear, I became afraid, and so the bear was fearsome. Even so, Ahmed says that emotions create the very effect of impressions that allow for the differentiation between ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ and thereby help to constitute both the ‘individual’/‘psychic’ and ‘society’/‘social.’ She acknowledges that feelings are rarely held ‘in common,’ and so suggests that the objects of emotion are what circulate, rather than the emotions themselves. The circulation of these objects, in turn, allows subjects to become invested in structures, including the structures that are the causes of subordination.

Emotions are about doing things in particular ways, as well as about both alignment and differentiation. Sadness aligns a subject with an other’s pain, but also maintains the distinction between the subject and the other. Pain and discomfort, themselves, create (an awareness of) the limits of the body and are oriented toward creating space between the subject and the cause of the pain. Hate often involves a sort of imbalance, wherein it does not have a clear referent, but rather depends on a failure to identify a clear and distinct other in order to do its work, creating instead a nebulous and slippery ‘they’ whose presence is constantly demanded (and created through hate’s acts and speech acts). Within fear, she hews closely to Heidegger’s outline, but adds that fear constricts bodily space and restricts mobility in social space. Disgust, which is about stickiness and blockages, also undermines the distinctions that it creates: what is felt to be disgusting also retains a kind of attraction for the disgusted. The same is true of shame; while it is true that shame is kind of like self-directed disgust that intensifies the skin, it also relies on the presence and attractiveness of others, in front of whom one can be ashamed. Finally for the emotions, love involves the alignment and identification with a constructed ideal, which ideality then returns to the subject. In her chapter on “Queer Feelings,” Ahmed argues that bodies take the form of repetitive norms, and highlights the roles of emotions in creating and maintaining those norms, as well as how they may provide a means of resisting those norms. Closing out her argument in “Feminist Attachments,” she interprets the role of anger in the cultural dismissal of feminism, and, without discounting the worth of that anger, argues that wonder may be a better public face for the movement, as it exemplifies the fundamental contingency of social institutions and reality.

Lesliemae says

Emotions materialize. Politics are read through them.

Co?kun Sayar says

Duygular bize zaman hakkında çok sey anlatır ; duygular zamanın "etidir". Hareket etmemiz ya da yolumuza devam etmemiz için ne kadar zaman gerektigini bize anlatırlar ki , bu bazen kisinin yasam sureinden bile

uzun olabilir . Gecmis , duygular vasitasiyla beden yuzeylerinde devamlilik gosterir . Bilincli bir sekilde hatirlanmasalar bile duygular tarihin nasıl ayakta kaldığını anlatırlar ; somurgecilik , kolelik , ırkcılık ve şiddet tarihlerinin yaşamaları ve dünyaları nasıl sekillendirdiğini anlatırlar. Duygunun zamanı her zaman gecmisle ve gecmisin nasıl yapistığıyla alakalı değildir . Duygular , otekilere karşı farklı yonelimler içermeleri yoluyla geleceğe de açılır . Elbette , duygular hakkında konustugumuzda sadece duygularдан bahsetmeyiz . Duygu nesneleri arasında geçis yapar , yapısır , adalet ve adaletsizliğin kamusal alanıyla bedenlerin yakın gecmislerine katıllırlar . Adalet sadece bir duygu değildir . Duygular da her zaman adil değildir . Fakat adalet bizi dünya yüzeyleri boyunca hareket ettiren , yaşamalarımızın sınırları içinde dalgalandırmalar yaratan duygular icerir . Bu duygularla nereye gittigimizin sorusu ise cevapsız kalmaya devam eder. Sayfa : 253

Liz says

there was a point in the middle where it felt like she was just listing different emotions and jotting down some thoughts on them and it wasn't clear how it all fit together. and I'm not totally sold on her semiotic angle on emotions. but the opening chapter on pain and the final chapters on queerness and feminism were great and worked very well together. I was especially moved by the discussion in "feminist attachments" on wonder and hope as affective states that open us up to social change. like, I was stuttering with joy when I tried to explain it to people. it works better as part of the book but if you don't have time to read the whole thing, I'd highly recommend that chapter to anyone involved in feminist organising.

TJ says

This book has totally altered how I think about emotions and the relationships between emotions, bodies, surfaces and space. I couldn't possibly give it an adequate review, I think, but here are some scattered & incomplete thoughts and impressions, that I may add to for my own use as I have time to.

Ahmed seems sometimes to work from a pretty negative epistemological point -- I don't think this is a bad thing, to be clear, and I'm thinking mostly of her writing on pain, and how pain shapes our sense of body and self (and, sort of conversely, how comfort is characterized as a loss of awareness of the body and its surfaces: "One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view... in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies.") Ahmed wants to dissuade her reader from this sort of negative reading ("it is not that pain *causes* the forming of the surface. Such a reading would ontologise pain [and indeed sensation more broadly] as that which 'drives' being itself"), but through the work it becomes difficult to shake the negative, as pain begins to feel intimately linked to the body, and comfort only available to the body that forgets its materiality.

It is interesting too to compare this pain that allows the body to become conscious of itself to Elaine Scarry's pain in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of The World*, which obliterates ("unmakes") the body and its world. Maybe the difference is in the degree of pain. Ahmed uses the stubbing of a toe as an example of that which allows the body to become conscious of its surface, while Scarry is concerned with how torture "unmakes" the subject's world.

But I don't want to make Ahmed out to be some kind of nihilist; she is very much not. One of my favorite sections of the book is "Feminism and Wonder," in which Ahmed describes her feminism as "creative" and full of "joy and care," and goes on to show how wonder (as in, the wonder of seeing the world "as if for the first time" through a new feminist lens) exposes the historicity of the world. "Wonder is about learning to see

the world as something that does not have to be, as and something that came to be, over time, and with work."

Her work on "stickiness" has to (has to!) be the most impressive of it all. She shows how stickiness is linked with disgust, in which stickiness is that which threatens to stick *to us*. And how a "sticky sign" is that which accumulates affective value at the same time as it blocks the sign/word from acquiring new (or different) affective value. She discusses most how disgust "sticks," through the circulation of certain signs, to bodies of color (in her analysis she discusses mostly how disgust sticks to bodies that can be read as "terrorist" in the post-9/11 U.S. or UK). I feel that a discussion of the way that disgust sticks to trans bodies (mostly trans womens' bodies) would enhance her analysis, as the display of disgust towards trans womens' bodies is so often made so visceral (think *The Crying Game*, in which IRA fighter Fergus literally vomits upon realizing that his love object is a trans woman). (but Ahmed isn't much of a pop culture analyst anyway)

Rosalie says

"In my model of sociality of emotions, I suggest that emotions create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries that allow us to distinguish between an inside and an outside in the first place. So emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made: the 'I' and the 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others...the surfaces of bodies 'surface' as an effect of the impressions left by others."

Sometimes this all makes perfect sense to me, and other times, I'm like, "What is she talking about???"

Caleb says

I finally reconciled myself to the fact that I don't love this book. In fact, the analysis in some chapters feels forced and a bit dated, bypassing what I consider some really interesting question about living emotion in favor of arguments (sometimes uneven) about how emotions circulate in discourse. (Of course, if the arguments feel dated, it is in part because Sara Ahmed herself has made these important views into part of the wider critical theory discourse.) And yes, the weakness of this book is that it is too focused on what is done in the name of different emotions rather than how the emotions themselves (and their objects) circulate.

That being said, the last two chapters bring things in the direction of Ahmed's really perceptive and insightful later work. (I love Queer Phenomenology, and there is movement in that direction here.) And the Afterword of the second edition (written ten years later) is essential reading for locating this book within the discourses of affect theory, studies of emotion, and politics.

Ahmed's great insights, which later receive more rigorous development, are present here: the historicity of feelings, the role of orientation as constitutive of experience, and the contingency of such orientations on histories that predate the encounter in the present. Moments of contact (proximity, surfaces of touch) and the moments of interpretation that enable the feelings to be intensified and circulated. Emotions are investments, with a history and a social future. This is a really interesting insight, even if it is asserted rather than argued for at places in this early book.

Michael Palkowski says

This book has really structured and oriented my thinking on this subject. It's something that I am constantly revisiting and trying to fully appreciate and understand.

Arda says

Cool stuff.

Notes from C.S. paper:

Ahmed (2004) demonstrates the ways in which emotions are not unrelated from what eventually ends up setting the status quo in a given society. Emotions, particularly those that have to do with love and hate, have a central role in the making of nations. Just like love unites, Ahmed notes, the shared hatred of the ‘imagined other’ is an extremely relevant factor in shaping up nations. Nationalism, after all, is represented in opposition to the other, and the inherent fear that comes from anxiety over what the other is, and, more specifically, what the other “might do” to change a nation is what the sense of nationalism feeds on. Nationalism, hence, is an ideal or idealized state of mind by which the other’s presence is perceived as potential damage to the ideal. In other words, nationalism, and the general notion of “this is who we are as a people” is a mere fantasy – it is an idealized image – which is ascertained by the threat, or the fear, that an outside force will shatter. Moreover, the assumption that nations are stable is also a delusion, and the presence of a body in its moving frame is always going to shake up and shatter the image.

Ahmed (2004) makes solid points when demonstrating that emotions are not, as one might presume, personal concerns limited to the individuals who feel them, but emotions in fact are so much more, and in turn they do so much more: they have a straightforward effect in the shaping and making of nations. The affective turn, Ahmed proceeds, is created within the motion: the repetition of words that ‘stick’ will bring associations within them.

In the understanding of the affective turn, it is important to note that the anticipation of how outside forces might threaten the status quo gives room for more threat of others. The fear, therefore, brings about more fear, and the emphasized fear does not so much have to do with what “is” but with what “might happen.” It is hence not so much the thing, but the making of the thing – the moving process – that causes the threatened anticipation, and, alternatively, it is the movement that intensifies the affect. Moreover, affect is not repressed, as Ahmed notes: it moves sideways and backwards before it gets out, and, as noted, it is not necessarily the ‘what is’ but the possibility what ‘could be’ which brings about fear (Ahmed, 2004, p.135).

On moving bodies, Ahmed (2004) explains the ways in which fears are embedded in bodies that are moving. The anticipation of the fear in the presence of moving bodies brings about threat of how this movement will change things, and how the motion presents danger on the assumed stability that the assumed ‘we’ have. Thus, the motion brings about fear and anxiety, and justifies borders, control, and war. There is justification, moreover, of containment. The instilment of fear of ‘what could this mean to our society and women if these people, whether as straight-out terrorists or potential terrorists disguised as asylum seekers would do?’ is an example of how the affective turn works, and this anticipated fear ends up justifying mechanisms of control and containment.

Anass Khayati says

I read this book because emotions figure strongly in my qualitative data. Initially, I so wanted to disregard the finding. I felt I had to come uncomfortably close to my interview partners, especially that I had to be critical of their emotions. This joins my naive and former understanding of emotions as having a sacred status that intellectual analysis can defile. According to Berger (1981), this is the "Romantic assumption ('to dissect is to kill,' said Wordsworth) that the value of an esthetic (or emotional) experience is in the mystery of its immediate impact, and that it therefore needs to be protected against analytic understanding" (236). Simultaneously, I hadn't the ghost of a notion what the literature on emotions say. Then I started looking for an intro and had the good fortune to run into this wonderful book. First, the writing is quite different from all the sociological stuff I read. But after some patience I eventually warmed to it. If I have to say something about the writing style, I'd say that the words subjects and objects are ubiquitous in the book and at times are dizzying and confusing. That's because Ahmed gets a lot of ideas and inspiration from the likes of Freud and Christeva and psychoanalysis in general. On the other hand, I felt quite at home whenever she cited psychologists or sociologists. But to give her credit, her book deals with a very sophisticated matter and the fact that she keeps it simple to the likes of me is quite an achievement.

The book starts with saying that emotions are cultural and social. Ahmed gives an impressive tour d'horizon before asserting that. Psychologists, sociologists, and critical theory and cultural studies folks will find in this tour a lot of interesting ideas on love, hate, shame, pain, among others.

The book then tackles the main point: The affective economies of emotions. This is not a theory rather than a new perspective. Ahmed explains that emotions work through language. Words circulate through repetition, sticking, resticking, and sliding through metonymy and resistance to literalisation. This circulation is discursive and done in relation to bodies. For instance, circulation serves the function of getting bodies together by labelling and excluding others (e.g., we the pure folks of this country against the refugees dirtying our purity; our hatred is just a way to love our country), and excluding others to get (our) bodies together. This circulation is not always exact, hence the importance of the sliding of signs and meanings. Ahmed's at length in the topic:

"Importantly, the word 'terrorist' sticks to some bodies as it reopens histories of naming, just as the word 'terrorist' slides into other words in the accounts of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (such as fundamentalism, Islam, Arab, repressive, primitive and so on). Indeed, the slide of metonymy can function as an implicit argument about the causal relations between terms (such as Islam and terrorism), but in such a way that it does not require an explicit statement. The work done by metonymy means that it can remake links – it can stick words like 'terrorist' and 'Islam' together – even when arguments are made that seem to unmake those links. Utterances like 'this is not a war against Islam' coexist with descriptions such as 'Islamic terrorists', which work to restick the words together and constitute their coincidence as more than simply temporal. The sliding between signs also involves 'sticking' signs to bodies: the bodies who 'could be terrorists' are the ones who might 'look Muslim'. Such associations stick precisely insofar as they resist literalisation."

Circulation, as far as it sticks, it is essential to all kinds of group-related emotions, and these define a lot of our existence. Commenting on existence, she writes, for instance, that "histories... remain alive insofar as they have already left their impressions" on the body. The body, on the other hand, is a vehicle for emotions and is not what it is without them. (Remember, Ahmed is not for a biological or psychological perspective on

emotions).

I find her talk on the skin as the point of contact with the world and our understanding of it fascinating. History, in Ahmed's terms, is what is under the skin.

This is a meagre comment on a great book. I'm also in a hurry I don't know why. (Perhaps because I already talked about it enough in my thesis?) But I recommend the book. Give it patience if you find the language unaccessible. One cannot always afford reading in their niche only.

Refs:

Berger, B. M. (1981). *The Survival of a Counterculture*. University of California Press.

s says

bruh

Sabrarf says

Perfectly happy with this book! I used to read Sara Ahmed's article a lot but I always want it to read this book because of one article I read before from it and of course the catching title of it.

In this book Sara explores the way in which emotions affects our bodies and the connection between emotions and politics. I personally really like 3 chapters more than others. her analysis of shame, the queer feeling and the Feminist attachments. By reading this book I could analyze my own emotions in my work and their relations to my body and how I embody them every day.

Rebecca says

this book!!!!

Diana says

A semiotic analysis on the politics of emotion, exemplified through current case studies. Sara Ahmed does this mostly by studying the articulation and expression of emotions of love and hate in contemporary issues such as the response of Americans to September 11 attacks, the demand of Australians to be ashamed of their history of violence towards Aboriginals, and or how hate organisations such as white supremacist groups justify themselves through a rhetoric of 'love'.

I found so much of her writing to be illuminating and full of the 'wonder' that she describes in the 2nd last chapter; a wonder of realising that this is how the world works, and then asking, why does it work like that? One of my favourite chapters was "The Affective Politics of Fear" where she explains the politics of fear

especially when selectively applied to certain bodies (brown, Muslim, South Asian, etc). In order to feel fear against such bodies, those bodies must have first already been coded as 'violent' or 'hateful'; as a body that one would feel fearful of. There is a discussion then of 'stickiness' how certain bodies accumulate signs, how certain negative values 'stick' to such bodies, a semiotic reading of racial prejudice.

I also found interesting how she explains that hate and love are basically impressions that are placed onto bodies, repeatedly, and that's what fear or love is -- how impressions are impressed on bodies -- to be turned against out of fear, to move towards someone who is 'safer', these are all acts of 'impressions'. In this way every act carries emotion, and every gesture communicates something, carries affect. It communicates which bodies are more agreeable & which are not, it communicates which bodies can be given more space and which bodies are given the injunction to shrink. The way these emotions are manipulated for affect thus can result in the justification of things like increased state power, justification for wars, or to 'cover-up' and conceal pain or guilt or shame.

Also great were the chapters "Queer Feelings" and the hopeful "Feminist Attachments" which really explicated the operations of power that through repetition of acts give the impression of what is considered 'natural' and therefore 'unnatural', and how one thus respond as a person who has been considered 'abject' / non-heteronormative. I feel like she has provided the most insightful discussion on the debate of marriage & whether it is good politics to want to be a part of that 'system' /heteronormative order.

Tara Brabazon says

A stunning and thoughtful book. Ahmed writes beautifully and her even and textured prose allows some powerful arguments to emerge. I was originally concerned that the argument would be too strongly textualized. Close textual readings would betray more complex theorizing. But instead, powerful arguments are configured about normativity and normative bodies. The role of shame and the 'fetish' of comfort remain percussive forces in global capitalism.

A moving, evocative and provocative book.
