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Tamed and untamed political emotions

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Paul Hoggett and Simon Thompson (eds) *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies*, New York, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012 (192 pp). ISBN 9781441119261 (paperback) RRP \$53.95.

Nicolas Demertzis (ed) *Emotions in Politics: The Affect Dimension in Political Tension*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 (336 pp). ISBN 9781137025654 (hard cover) RRP \$220.95.

Martha C. Nussbaum *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013 (457 pp). ISBN 9780674724655 (hard cover) RRP \$72.00.

Early in the year, Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Tanya Plibersek mounted a persuasive defence of reason over emotion in a speech pleading for clemency for two Australians, Andrew Chan and Myuran Sukumaran, condemned to death in Indonesia. Referring to her own response when her brother was murdered in Port Moresby, and reflecting her feeling that no punishment for his killers could have been extreme enough, she called for universal and consistent rules to be applied, so that ‘we don’t make decisions about punishment on the basis of how we feel’ (Ireland & Bourke 2015). This was an important intervention in a debate in which more focus was given to the particularity of the case rather than to universal principles. Considerable public emotion was aroused by representations of the worthy and redeemed character of the two accused. Yet, a universal position opposing the death penalty would include all prisoners—including those who showed no remorse, painted no pictures or refused any opportunities for atonement. Taking the feeling out of political decision-making is sometimes a laudable aim but, it would seem, politically impossible in others. The fact that Plibersek’s defence of reason was conducted in a wavering voice replete with emotion stands as a case in point.

The complex entanglement between reason and emotion is evident in all political debate. In public discourse the idea that politics is concerned only with the reasoned exchange of dispassionate arguments is maintained by marginalising less rational human feelings and in viewing passions as politically dangerous. Over the last decade, social and cultural theory has challenged the liberal notion that emotions have no place in the public sphere. Putting emotion and affect at the centre of research and analysis, this focus on the emotions in the social sciences and humanities has been called the ‘affective turn’. While this ‘turn’ encompasses a range of methodologies and disciplines, it is founded on the premise that the social and political cannot be understood without taking into account the embodied and less conscious aspects of human feeling. All three books under review situate themselves—or are situated by others—as working within this turn toward affectivity. In Paul Hoggett and Simon Thompson’s collection, *Politics and the Emotions: The Affective Turn in Contemporary Political Studies*, the subtitle signals the editors’ intention to apply the categories of emotion and affect to different political situations, as do the essays in Nicolas Demertzis’ *Emotions in Politics: The Affect Dimension in Political Tension*; a series of case studies on the role of complex feelings in different contemporary political crises. Martha Nussbaum’s *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* is more difficult to categorise and sits uncomfortably within these contemporary theoretical developments. Each text turns attention to both emotions and affects, with the conceptual distinction between the two revolving around consciousness and discourse. Emotion is generally considered to refer to more conscious feelings that are anchored in language and meaning (Hoggett & Thompson, 2012, pp. 2–3) and affects, pre-conscious sensations, often outside discourse and located in the body’s capacity to be affected and to transmit sensations like anxiety or rage through groups.

In their introduction to *Politics and the Emotions*, Hoggett and Thompson refer back to the Greeks and to

Machiavelli to highlight how recent the separation of reason and the emotions is in political studies. In their view, the human subject has been under-socialised by this emphasis on reason and an analysis of affect and emotion will lead to insights into ‘the structure and the texture of society at its various levels, from the family group, through to organisations and beyond to the wider social movements in civil society’ (p. 3). Contributors to the volume adopt a critical stance toward the idea of political subjects as rational actors. Some contributions also reflect on and also criticise this rekindled interest in the significance of human feeling, the best of them documenting some of the political implications of this direction of theory. The book covers a wide terrain and the overarching focus on affect sometimes makes for quite loose ties between different essays. In an attempt to delimit this broad field, the editors provide a complicated and perhaps unnecessary taxonomy of different emotions and how they can be defined. This typology of political feelings is ambitious and overly schematic, reminiscent of psychology textbooks of the 1980s. Emotions are organised into categories which include ‘positive moral emotions’, ‘negative feelings of repulsion’ and feelings associated with loss, hurt and flight (pp. 7–12). The typology represents Hoggett and Thompson’s preference for literature from the social sciences rather than contemporary cultural theory. This at times gives a rather commonsensical quality to their categories. Notably, literary influences are scant and it is surprising to find that they do not include the path-breaking work of Brian Massumi in their analysis. Massumi is known for his radical rethinking of affect. His monograph, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002) attempts to develop a new cultural and theoretical vocabulary specific to affect (p. 27). Affect is considered to be a form of intensity and sensation that is always in movement and resistant to either meaning or critique (p. 28). Accordingly, affect displaces cognition as central to the human subject. Massumi’s work has become a touchstone for the affective turn and exerts a significant influence on this new multi-disciplinary field (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 5). Unlike Massumi, Hoggett and Thompson appear more interested in the positive, transformative nature of emotions, (not necessarily positive emotions themselves) than in affect as either an intensity or as ‘a central mechanism of social reproduction’ (Hemmings 2005, p. 551).

Politics and the Emotions successfully questions the axiom that reasoned argument leads to good policymaking. Essays range from discussions about deliberative democracy, challenging a model of deliberation as neutral and dispassionate, to the role of feeling in conflict and post-conflict societies, including a powerful ‘emotional history of the civil war in Sierra Leone’ by Steven Kaindaneh and Andrew Rigby (pp. 161–166). This essay and its focus on the consolidation of particular collective emotions, and indeed the book’s attention to activist mobilisation and protest taps into a rich vein of scholarship over the last decade concerning the role of emotions in social movement activity. James Jasper provides an instructive overview of this work that attempts to understand affective loyalties in movement mobilisation, the emotions associated with political agency and the affective conditions that sustain group cohesion in the face of personal danger (Jasper 2011). Aspects of movements that were previously considered epiphenomenal or unimportant are now given due explanatory power in this literature and this widens our comprehension of activism and the ties that can underpin social movement participation.

Deborah Gould’s essay in the Hoggett and Thompson collection offers a model analysis of the potential of this theoretical framework. She outlines her research on the direct action AIDS movement in America, ACT UP (AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power) and a history of what she calls its ‘affective landscape’ (p. 96). From the sense of empowerment and optimism that activists experienced in 1987 and 1988, Gould documents the accumulating deaths of the early 1990s and the relentless suffering and grief, pessimism and depletion of AIDS activists as they ferried friends to doctor’s appointments and hospices, changed incontinence pads, cleaned bedsores and ‘went to memorial service after memorial service’ (p. 98). While not as large as the epidemic in Africa, Gould’s essay reminds us of the devastating scale of the AIDS epidemic in America, and her analysis also creates an emotional, visceral response in the reader. Her account draws some quite original conclusions about the role of despair as a mobilising force, with examples of how ACT UP turned grief into anger. Her insight into the way collective feelings are always contingent, and that despair does not necessarily deactivate its subjects, demonstrates some of the best possibilities that an affective theoretical turn can provide.

In *Emotions in Politics: The Affect Dimension in Political Tension* Nicolas Demertzis has collected essays within a similar theoretical framework to that Hoggett and Thompson work within, which Demertzis calls the ‘emotionology’ of our times (p. 4). His book is distinguished by its specific case study approach and its focus

on historical and contemporary moments of political tension. Such moments include the Greek financial crisis, the Arab Spring, the rise of British ethno-nationalist movements and contemporary Islamophobia. Without this concern with political ruptures, it would be difficult to make a clear distinction between the essays in these two collections. In some ways, Demertzis' book is less psychological than Hoggett and Thompson's, even though it is published in the Palgrave Studies of Political Psychology series. It attempts to retrieve the role of affect in analyses of civic action and the organisation of political power (p. 1). Avoiding a decisive definition of the emotions, or the difference between emotion and affect, Demertzis acknowledges that much can be 'lost in translation' when emotions are rigidly fixed and classified (p. 4). He prefers, instead, to emphasise the plasticity of emotions and how subject they are to historical variability. Importantly, the essays included in *Emotions in Politics*, conceive of emotions as culturally, socially and psychologically mediated yet not entirely reducible to a social construction. This recognition that there is a bodily dimension to emotions at a neurobiological level is different from the school of thought represented by Massumi (2002), which concerns itself with affect as an 'other than conscious knowing' at the level of bodily sensations, a visceral state that has only an oblique association to social and political relations.

In keeping with Demertzis' aim to 'combine theory-building with empirical, lived examples' (p. 10), his analysis (with Bettina Davou) of the Greek financial crisis highlights both the strengths and weaknesses of a politically informed sociological approach to the role of emotions in politics. The essay 'Feeling the Greek Financial Crisis', attempts to unravel the various feelings expressed in media reports of the crisis and to determine the relationship between the emotional response of Greek citizens and their political attitudes, voting behaviors or activism. The authors map the affective contours of the crisis in terms of reported social displacement, mistrust of institutions, personal loss, alienation, the pauperisation of pensioners and the occurrence of attempted suicides (p. 94). They acknowledge that affective responses to the Greek financial crisis are multi-faceted and that these media representations, may not necessarily reflect what people actually feel (p. 93). Nonetheless, the essay provides significant insight into a less visible side of the financial crisis and how people's internal worlds are shattered by the external disruptions. The authors remind us that for Greece there is a 'vivid collective memory' of the famine of 1940–41 occasioned by the Axis occupation during World War Two, and that this fearful memory is mobilised by many Greek commentators who describe the current crisis as a 'new occupation' (p. 97).

Less persuasive is the claim that the emotional response to the financial crisis has not led to a 'systematic and massive action' but instead to several 'low-risk', 'low effort actions' (p. 97). This is easy to criticise with hindsight as the essay concentrates on the years 2010–11 and so pre-dates the explosion of collective action around the 'bailout referendum' of 2015. Demertzis and Davou seemed to forget that emotional responses are poor predictors of cultural and political developments. In 2013 they wrote:

Greek society appears so emotionally weakened that possibilities for reversing the emotional climate are scarce. In the absence of a robust civil society, and the presence of fear, hopelessness and political inefficacy, social solidarity is hardly expected to flourish (p. 114).

There were many remarkable features of the July 2015 referendum on whether Greece should accept the austerity measures and bailout conditions imposed by the European Commission, the International Monetary Fund and the banks. The expression of social solidarity around the overwhelming 'Oxi' (No) vote in all regions of Greece was overwhelming. It was neither low-risk nor 'low-effort' as the authors had predicted. The notoriously unstable and often transitory nature of affects, what Demertzis himself calls their 'plasticity' (p. 4), is precisely one of the limitations of affect theory if applied instrumentally to collectivities, as though emotions are simply a resource to be mobilised by certain rational interests, rather than infused with symbolic identifications, cultural meanings, conflicts and displacements at the level of the individual person.

The quintessentially political emotion, according to Thomas Hobbes is fear because only fear is capable of forcing us into political association with one another (Hoggett & Thompson 2012, p. 130). This view is subjected to a most rigorous epistemological and ethical challenge in Martha Nussbaum's *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice* (2013). Love replaces fear in her hierarchy of which emotions are most important for democracy. The sheer ambition of this book and its philosophical, literary, cultural and scholarly breadth makes any review by definition highly selective. Nussbaum does not set out to tackle a familiar social issue

and ‘just add emotions and stir’, the impression sometimes created by the sheer number of symposiums, special issues of journals, conferences and textbooks with ‘affect’ in the title. In fact, as I have suggested above, it is difficult to situate Nussbaum’s work within a single theoretical category, so broad and all-encompassing is her analysis. Her book builds on her previous scholarship on the cognitive and moral dimensions of emotions as thoughts, evaluative judgments and beliefs (Nussbaum 2001). In *Political Emotions* her focus is on liberal political principles and the proposition that love is an absolute necessity for liberal democracy to flourish. Emotions, in her view, have a moral value and can be cultivated by music, poetry, sculpture, civic festivals and nations themselves. This ‘political cultivation of emotion’ requires engendering ‘strong commitment to worthy projects that require effort and sacrifice’ and to keep the forces of disgust, envy and ‘the desire to inflict shame on others’ at bay (p. 3). Unlike perspectives that see reason and emotion in opposition, Nussbaum rejects a characterisation of emotions as ‘just impulses’ and conceives of emotions as evaluative, as containing appraisals within them (p. 6). At the risk of trivialising what by any counts is a monumental and important study, it is as though all the good emotions have a little bit of reason embedded in them, emotions-lite perhaps.

Throughout *Political Emotions*, Naussbaum imagines an unrealised but aspirational ideal of a democratic society where the finer emotions are cultivated by and serve the liberal state for the common good, without sacrificing a space for individual liberties, critical inquiry, pluralism or dissent. It is difficult to reconcile the nobility of the principles she so poetically espouses and the actual social conditions in neo-liberal societies, particularly those suffering from austerity policies and ideologies today. Neo-liberalism is not a term that appears at all in Naussbaum’s book. While she promotes the importance of a ‘vigilant critical culture’ as the ‘key to the stability of liberal values’, (p. 124) her ideal society is one of consensus rather than conflict. She writes: ‘The consensus may not exist at present, but it ought to be a plausible possibility for the future, and we should be able to envisage a plausible trajectory from where we currently are to such a consensus’ (p. 128).

Coming from a framework that views the social world as involving a struggle for and against domination and an ongoing conflict between social and class adversaries to control community life, I find it difficult to see as plausible Naussbaum’s longed for trajectory. The chasm between the ideal and the actual appears most stark in the book’s fascination with and attachment to India. It is certainly enriching to read extracts from the exquisite poetry, novels and songs of Nobel Prize winning Bengali literary figure Rabindranath Tagore. Naussbaum is also keen to include key literary and philosophical thinkers from India in the usually European-focused list of liberal thinkers. This has little to do with an attempt to decolonise a Western canon than her staunch belief that much can be learned about truth and conceptions of justice from Indian intellectual traditions and figures like Tagore, Gandhi or Bankimchandra Chatterjee. Nevertheless, in following Tagore, and arguing that India’s present problems should be confronted in ‘a spirit of love’, is Naussbaum taking refuge in romanticism? Her naïve directive appears completely irrelevant to the inequality and violence of a globalised India today.

In *Political Emotions* Naussbaum gives serious weight to the role of art and music in a liberal just society. She somewhat idealistically views art as having an inherently democratic spirit and writes that ‘poetry, music and art are great uniters: they take people out of themselves and forge a shared community’ (p. 388). Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony is an antidote to this idealised view that a shared community through music necessarily has anything to do with either love or justice. In the brilliant and unexpectedly illuminating British documentary *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (Feinnes 2012), Žižek discusses the way Beethoven’s ‘Ode to Joy’ has come to represent an anthem that is ‘a kind of an ode to humanity as such, to the brotherhood and freedom of all people’. He then traces the shadowy history of this towering piece of music, showing images of various dictators and regimes listening to it, from the Nazis, for whom the ode was a nationalist anthem, to its celebration as a communist song by Stalin in the Soviet Union, its use in the Cultural Revolution in China (when almost all other Western music was banned) and its significance for the extreme right when Zimbabwe was the apartheid state of Southern Rhodesia. He points out that now the Ninth Symphony has become the unofficial anthem for the European Union. Žižek argues that this piece of music allows us to imagine ‘a perverse scene of universal fraternity in which the world’s dictators, arch-terrorists, and war criminals all embrace each other’ (2012). Absurd though this image may be, it is a vivid reminder that the emotions Naussbaum celebrates—love, compassion, national pride, or the value of

fine music—can equally serve the opposite of a just society. Extremely authoritarian forms of group bonding can be based on love as much as on hate.

The danger in the ‘affective turn’ is that affects can be viewed as abstract rather than placed in their social and political context. At a time when populism is on the rise in Australia and internationally, and when fear is employed widely as a mode of governance, it is important to keep the dark side of affectivity in mind. The public expression of emotions is always mobilising—but not necessarily in a positive direction. Tanya Plibersek recognised this risk in her plea for a universal principle of reason to be applied at a time of heightened personal and political emotions around the execution of Chan and Sukumaran in Indonesia. There is no formula for when emotions in the public sphere are enabling or tyrannical. If the affective turn is to expand our understanding of contemporary politics, both affects and emotions need always to be situated socially, ideologically and historically within relations of power.

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