

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Ben Anderson, *Encountering Affect: Capacities, Apparatuses, Conditions*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-7546-7024-7 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4724-3777-8 (ebook)

Of all the many “turns” that have been declared over the past several decades in geography, few have been as diverse and significant as the interrelated “affective” and “non-representational” turns. What is more, few turns have been so contentious in terms of their relationships to the political (e.g. see Cresswell 2012; Rose 2010; Thien 2005; Tolia-Kelly 2006). Several years ago, for example, it was noted in this book review forum that “[m]ost radical geographers have not embraced non-representational theory [NRT] despite the repeated claims by those who write under the NRT banner that it has radical potential”, and therefore “perhaps it is up to *us* to make NRT radical” (Somdahl-Sands 2013: 1, 5).

Ben Anderson’s *Encountering Affect* brilliantly recasts the status of these contentions and calls by providing a painstakingly argued and meticulously crafted justification of the following premise: “Understanding how power functions in the early 21st century requires that we trace how power operates through affect and how affective life is imbued with relations of power, without reducing affective life to power’s effect” (p.8). The book’s seven chapters, which Anderson tells us are “about precarity, optimism, emergency, pressure, debility-dependency-dread, morale, boredom, urgency and greed” (p.1), are a riveting and tightly-focused journey through the affective geographies of disaster relief, political speeches, macroeconomic policy, war apparatuses, military psy-ops, retail atmospherics, emergency response exercises, and everyday music listening. Along the way, *Encountering Affect* engages the writings of not just the usual suspects in affect theory such as Brian Massumi, Gilles Deleuze, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, but also the role of affect in the writings of Karl Marx, Michel Foucault, Franz Fanon, and Raymond Williams. *Encountering Affect*, then, is not only a thematically and

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theoretically rich book; it is also eminently relevant to the concerns of the radical geography community.

In Chapter 1, “Affective Life”, Anderson adroitly introduces the book’s main approaches to affect by way of three “events of hope” or “scenes” (p.3) that highlight “three translations of the term affect” (p. 18) italicized in the following sentence: the 2010 global media event of the emergency rescue of 33 trapped Chilean miners, which highlights affect as a “*bodily capacity* emergent from encounters” (p.18); President Obama’s 2008 inauguration speech, which highlights affect as a “*collective condition* that mediates how life is lived and thought” (p.18); and, the importance of consumer confidence indexes, which highlight affect as an “*object-target* of apparatuses” (p.18). Anderson’s project, which beams with care and clarity, is all about elaborating on the conceptual nuances and empirical insights that these three translations of affect afford. Soon after the three opening scenes, Anderson provides a useful overview of the affective turn across the social sciences, humanities, and the discipline of geography. Highlighting Sedgwick’s work on the plurality of affect, Anderson affirms the “freedom of the affects to combine with more or less any aspect of life” (p.6), and suggests “that there can never be a carefully bounded affectual or emotional geography from other geographies” (p.6). In addition, Anderson states that affects “are constantly infusing embodied practices, resonating with discourses, coalescing around images, becoming part of institutions, animating political violences, catalysing political communities, and being known and intervened in, amongst much else” (p.6). Again, the relevance of these topics to radical geography is plain.

The opening chapter also addresses the paradox of how affects (along with emotions, feelings, and other modalities) supposedly cannot be directly known yet have produced a proliferation of research on affect in the social sciences and humanities that “attempts to name the unnameable, to think the unthinkable, to represent what is

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supposedly, from some perspectives but by no means all, non-representational” (p.7). Later in the chapter—and readers encountering affect for the first time will appreciate this—Anderson tackles the question of what an affect is via Marx’s writing on greed, the worker’s body, and labour power in “The Working Day” in Volume 1 of *Capital*. Here, Anderson alerts us to how affect is “two-sided. It consists of bodily capacities to affect *and* to be affected that emerge and develop in concert” (p.9), and that “affect pertains to capacities rather than existing properties of the body. Affects are about what a body may be able to do in any given situation, in addition to what it currently is doing and has done” (p.10). Anderson then returns to the example of greed to suggest “how a differentiated conceptual vocabulary might work to attune to different aspects of affective life” (p.12) that inform two key themes of the book: “*structure of feeling* to speculate on how an excessive greed seems to define the mood of a particular epoch in its relation to the accumulation and circulation of money (see Chapter 5)” (p.12) and “*bodily capacities* to describe how greed becomes an embodied disposition that distorts and dominates an individual’s relation to their life (see Chapter 4)” (p.12). Mediation is another important concept, which Anderson states is a “general term for processes of relation that involve translation and change and from which affects as bodily capacities emerge as temporary stabilisations” (p.13).

The above conceptual points of departure are central to the book’s task of providing “an account of how affective life is organised and mediated that sits alongside the emphasis on the excess of affective life over and above existing determinations” (p.17). In carrying out this task, the book asserts that “affect is not one thing” (p.17) because it “is simultaneously an object-target, bodily capacity, and collective condition” (p.17) and thus “there are multiple ways of ordering affect and multiple processes of mediation through which affects are imbricated with other processes” (p.17).

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A particular strength of *Encountering Affect* is how Anderson frequently tells his readers where we are going, how we got there, and how sections and chapters relate to one another. As I got further into the book, I kept on thinking about its monadological structure, that is, its jewel-like or mirrored honeycomb composition. That is to say, rather than consisting of chapters that build on a linear argument, *Encountering Affect's* chapters and sub-sections refract and reflect back on previous ideas and passages in ways that retroactively enhance its multilayered conceptual arguments and empirical analyses. In this respect, Chapters 2-3 focus on Foucault's concept of apparatus to "trace how affective life is an object-target" with emphasis "placed on the specificities of the cases given that the theoretical vocabulary is designed to explicate the workings of apparatuses" (p.18). Chapters 4-6 "spend longer elaborating three concepts that make up a specific version of affective life—affect, structures of feeling, and affective atmospheres" (p.18).

While *Encountering Affect's* carefully wrought argument is praiseworthy, it occasionally means that the book fails to adequately explore alternative and sometimes contrary paradigmatic lines of thought on affect, life, and the political. For example, at the end of Chapter 1, writing on the book's "conceptual resources" (p.21), Anderson notes how they "break with any assumption that life is organised through some type of transcendent form. By which I mean that emphasis is placed on how multiple processes of mediation work together, rather than finished orders" (p.21). Meta-theoretical statements like this, which are common in Foucauldian and non-representational theories, are the source of considerable debate in social theory about the extent to which nominalist and immanentist positions can adequately explain how social and historical change happens and where change comes from (e.g. see Copjec 1994; Feldner and Vighi 2007). My quibble here is not so much about a specific theoretical weakness in *Encountering Affect* (my Lacanian and Thomist persuasions distrusts the immanentist

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position but my Nietzschean standpoint affirms it), as it is about how much of our theoretical labour (mine included) in contemporary geography is spent on introducing new or intensifying established and already-tricky theories, rather than engaging in spirited and productive trans-theoretical debate and discussion (e.g. see Pile 2011).

Chapter 2, “Apparatuses”, focuses on “the point where a relation of power meets a form of knowledge” (p. 24), addressing how an “an ‘object of power’ names the surface of contact for specific modes of power, and thus acts as a hinge between a desired outcome and the actions that make up the exercise of power” (p.25). Anderson suggests that, “establishing a surface of contact for power offers a solution to the problem of how to extend action into the future” (p. 25). To empirically illustrate these issues, he uses the case study of ScentAir UK’s products (1,500 scents) that can (according to its marketing materials) “turn atmospheres into resources to be harnessed for economic value-creation” (p.25). Drawing on Foucault’s implicit archaeologies and genealogies of affect, Anderson emphasizes the “variegated types of power” (p.30) and argues “we should be cautious about claims that the manipulation of subjects as ‘affective beings’ or collectives as ‘affect structures’ is a single or coherent phenomenon that can be easily mapped onto contemporary political-economic transformations” (p.30). As a result Anderson eschews a simple narrative of the birth of today’s so-called ‘affective society’ as a result of some epochal changes and favours the notion of affective life becoming “an object-target as part of the ‘complex edifices’ that are apparatuses” (p.33). The remainder of the chapter explores morale (an object-target) in a state of “total war” wherein governments attempt to secure the morale of its population.

Chapter 3, “Versions”, traces “how apparatuses emerge, coalesce and change, and how multiple ‘versions’ (Despret 2004) of affect are enacted” (p.50). It opens up with the section “Debility, Dependency, Dread” that ushers in themes of helplessness, captivity, and the weaponization of affect. Like the previous chapter, Anderson emphasizes the

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relationality and multiplicity or “versions” of affect as an object-target of apparatuses. He brings to the fore the materialism of representation (e.g. its forms of ideas, words, diagrams, models, graphs, and so on) by way of the Vinciane Despret’s work on emotion and performativity, which breaks from “the sterile opposition between social constructionism and naturalism” (p.59). The chapter also highlights two points: first, how “‘debility, dependency, dread’ becomes an entity by being named through a set of practices of representing that are integral to the ongoing (re)elaboration of a behaviouralism-war apparatus” (p.60-61), and second, how “the representation of the affective state itself has an affective life” (p.61). Anderson provides examples of the weaponization of various versions of affect in military psy-ops, interrogation techniques, CIA manuals, and incarceration strategies. The final section of the chapter, “The Necessity But Insufficiency of Critique”, sees Anderson affirm critique as a “specific ethos of engagement with apparatuses, one that aims to bring an apparatus to crisis, and one that is imbued with the type of optimism Foucault spoke of in 1981” (p.75). Anderson also suggests how “critique alone is insufficient because affective life is mediated and organised in ways that exceed the making of affective life into power’s object or the object of power” (p.75). The latter point is central to the next two chapters, which are the subject of Anderson’s attempt to rework a “dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a book, a sentence, an idea to life” (p.76) (here he cites Foucault’s words in a *Le Monde* interview) in a way that can “outline an analytic of affect adequate to the complexities of affective life” (p. 76).

Chapter 4, “The Imbrication of Affect”, announces that “[a]ny consideration of affective life begins with an affirmation that affects are real forces that are part of the composition of common worlds rather than mere epiphenomena that can be reduced to the operation of apparatuses” (p.77). Later in the book, Anderson tells us that this chapter is “titled to make is clear that affective life is always-already involved with what might

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seem non-affective” (p.165). The chapter’s main focus is on affect as a bodily capacity in relation to “the account of apparatuses in the preceding two chapters and the description of collective affects in the following two chapters” (p.78). As a “hinge chapter” (p.78), Anderson engages Massumi’s, Fanon’s, and Deleuze’s (with Félix Guattari) reading of Baruch Spinoza. Anderson answers the question of how affect is non-representational by stating “affects are augmentations or diminutions of a body’s ‘force of existing’ that are expressed in feelings and qualified in emotions (and where emotions/affects become indistinguishable in experience” (p.85). Anderson also discusses non-representational modalities in the bio- and neurosciences, as well as offering finely-tuned analyses of how “affects are transpersonal rather than pre-personal” (p.87), not “some kind of material bodily substrate” and independent “from signification and meaning” (p.88), and not at the “level of ineffable automatic bodily reactions that are non-representational in the sense that they are somehow inaccessible to subjects” (p.93). Anderson’s creative use of Fanon’s insights on the affective states of racialized subjects is especially helpful. What is less satisfying, however, is Anderson’s somewhat limited engagement with Ruth Leys’ (2011) important critique of the affective turn in the humanities and social sciences. Here, Anderson frames Leys’ argument as a critique of Benjamin Libert’s influential experiments on conscious intention and brain activity. Anderson’s argument is that Leys “does not pay enough attention to the specific encounter with brain science and how exactly brain science is being used” (p.87, n.11), nor does Leys “pay enough, or indeed any, attention to how meaning and signification are being thought about differently in recent affect theory” (p.87, n.11). These are fair points but the statement is found wanting for two reasons. First, Leys’ intervention is much more than an engagement with Libert; it is a well-marshalled critique of the affective turn. Second, it would have been useful to state exactly how meaning and signification is being thought differently in recent affect theory.

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Chapter 5, “Structures of Feeling”, is my joint-favourite chapter (with the similarly structured Chapter 6) partly because of its “deliberately speculative narrative” (p.134) and partly because it is an extremely instructive engagement with issues of public feelings and social life, as well as a brilliant reading of Raymond Williams’ tense yet productive relationship toward structuralist Marxism. In terms of Williams and his “notoriously ambiguous concept of ‘structures of feeling’” (p.20), Anderson pursues the “interesting question[s]” (p.117) of “how does a structure of feeling have effects and become part of the social” and “[h]ow does a structure of feeling mediate?” (p.117). He gives us answers by illustrating how structures of feeling involve precariousness insofar as people restlessly move between jobs in the face of “‘predictably unpredictable’” (p.130) labour markets. Chapter 6, “Affective Atmospheres”, sees Anderson experiment with the now-popular term “affective atmosphere” in order to deal with “the problem of how collective affects become conditions that shape without necessarily determining capacities to affect and be affected” (p.137). If the previous chapter examined how a “structure of feeling ‘presses’ and ‘sets limits’” (p.134), this chapter considers how “an atmosphere envelop[s] people and things” (p.134). Echoing Anderson’s earlier pedagogical use of Marx to elaborate on what an affect is by way of greed, Anderson engages Marx’s 1856 invocation of a “revolutionary atmosphere” in an address to an audience in London. Along the way Anderson examines the differences between Mikel Dufrenne and Gernot Böhme’s phenomenological conceptualizations of atmosphere. Using evocative fieldwork-based participant observation narratives of participants in a UK-based “Exercise Operation” Anderson shows how atmospheres have a form of “‘emergent causality’ [William E. Connolly’s term] as a particular process of affective mediation” (p.156). A particularly poignant section of Anderson’s field notes is worth quoting at length:

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What would you do? What would you do? Twice the question is asked. A pause of four seconds, before the question is repeated. Raising his voice, the member of a government security agency slows his speech and carefully enunciates each word: WHAT ... WOULD ... YOU ... DO? I feel anxious. I look away. It feels unfair. Even though I'm only observing, I'm desperate to avoid becoming the object of questioning. The question is being directed to a chief executive of a local authority who is playing in the exercise. The correct answer is contained within the "major incident" plan that is being tested in the exercise. Perhaps, he hasn't read it. Perhaps, he has just frozen under questioning. Hesitant, he stumbles over the answer. He tries again. His nervousness catches on.

Passages like the above (and there are many) convincingly demonstrate Anderson's earlier claim that affects are "real forces that are part of the composition of common worlds rather than mere epiphenomena" (p.77) and that they are thoroughly enlaced (but not reducible to or entirely determined) by concrete encounters, situations, and circuits of power.

A key strength of the concluding Chapter 7, "Mediating Affective Life", is that it lucidly reflects on the purposes of the book—"a response to a set of problematics that strike me as key to understanding how affective life happens... Rather than a theory of affect, what I have offered is better described as an analytics of affect" (p.164). Anderson also reminds us that the book does "not [seek] to offer a comprehensive theory of affect that would presume to be the last word" (p.168), but is rather an attempt "to learn from the attention to life as impersonal force, without giving life's productivity a positive value or finding in life a guarantee that things might be different and better or necessarily oppositional to modalities of power" (p.168). Returning to the propositions set out in Chapter 1, Anderson provides four questions/tasks that may orientate future work on the

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processes of affective life: first, if affect is always multiple, contextual, and articulable with anything, it is necessary “to understand the operation, efficacy and coexistence of the varied processes of mediation through which affective life is ordered” (p.168); second, given the collective and forever mediated status of affective life “we need to understand how affective life is part of specific patterns of relations and events” (p.169); third, if affects, feelings, and atmospheres cannot be reduced “to non-affective social or natural processes, then analysis might focus on the different and specific ways in which they act and make a difference” (p.169); and finally, if “affective life is always-already informed by ‘versions’ of emotion, affect, feeling, passion, and so on” as well as the performative effects of representations of affective life, then a theory of affect “must also acknowledge its own contingency” (p.169).

In sum, *Encountering Affect* is an agenda-setting and truly impressive piece of scholarship. Its chief contributions are as follows. First, it productively critiques and builds on the many established theories of affect by providing a fresh, rigorous, and compelling set of analytics. Here, its influence deserves to reach far beyond the discipline of geography. Second, it is a path-breaking publication in cultural and political geography because of the care and scope of its analyses of the enforcements of affective and political life. Third, I expect its readers whether unfamiliar, unsure, or well versed in affect theories will find much in this book that can help advance and enhance their own research programs.

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