

**Affective Normativity and the Status Quo**

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*Paper presented at the International Society for Political Psychology Conference,  
Barcelona, July 2006*

***Conference paper: please do not quote or cite without explicit permission***

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*“No appeal to psychology was necessary to understand why a hungry man stole bread or why workers, fed up with being pushed around, decided to down tools. What social psychology had to explain however 'is not why the starving individual steals or why the exploited individual strikes, but why the majority of starving individuals do not steal, and the majority of exploited individuals do not strike'. Classical sociology could 'satisfactorily explain a social phenomenon when human thinking and acting serve a rational purpose, when they serve the satisfaction of needs and directly express the economic situation. It fails, however, when human thinking and acting contradict the economic situation, when, in other words, they are irrational’”*  
(Brinton, 1970) “The Irrational in Politics”

Maurice Brinton (real name Chris Pallis) was a distinguished medic who was also involved with a series of revolutionary groups, most notably the UK-based libertarian communist group “Solidarity”. One of his contributions to these movements was a short book called “The Irrational in Politics”, from which the above is an extract. As Brinton suggests, the precepts and norms of social order are not primarily rational or discursive. In this paper it will be argued that they are in fact primarily affective, and that the inherent sociality of human life is first of all carried and realised in consensual (‘embodied-with’) social practices, and only subsequently fixed or articulated in language. It is our lived engagement with the lifeworld that always already precedes, and makes possible, any second-order discursive reflection upon our own actions and those of others. This is why Voestermans (1991) argues that norms are norms primarily *because of* their affective character, which provides us with compulsions to act in particular ways. And it is precisely by this felt compulsion, rather than by their reflective articulation in language and discourse, that norms come to have their normative influence.

Brinton turns to Reich and the nexus of the family in order to understand how these affective compulsions are produced. His account is very much of its time, and could be considered overly sexualized and unjustly condemning of families whose social position and material resources may already make their lives extremely difficult. Attempting to avoid these problems, this paper will draw upon a range of resources from social theory, phenomenology and neuroscience in order to address the problem

that Brinton sets out.

In order to theorise more thoroughly the role of affect in social stasis, the account presumes a minimalist notion of embodied subjectivity. The subjectivity presumed here is immanent rather than transcendent, it is societally co-constituted and emergent rather than fixed and essentialist. It is constituted from the dialectical intermingling of two experiential streams: discourse, in the form of inner speech; and feeling, the ongoing, ever present sense of the state of our body-brain systems in their situated flow of being in and transacting with the world around us (Cromby, 2004). Feelings here fall into three overlapping types: they consist of the somatic component of emotion, non-emotional feelings such as hunger, pain and sexual desire, and the subtler relational feelings of knowing which John Shotter calls “knowing of the third kind” (Shotter, 1993). All three kinds of feeling are socialized: evidence for this comes from neuroscience (Damasio, 1994), anthropology (Shweder, 2004), sociology and social theory (Bourdieu, 1977; Charlesworth, 1999; Elias, 1978), and psychology (Benson, 2001; Ginsburg & Harrington, 1996; Ratner, 2000; Shotter, 1993).

Socialised feelings and discourse come together to *co-constitute* embodied subjectivity in the moment-by-moment flow of being in the world, where each is both called out by, and partially constitutive of, our material and relational position. Feelings endow our actions and talk with motives, valences and meanings, whilst discourse temporarily ‘fixes’ the flow of socialised feeling, rendering it available for representation to self and others. Each informs and influences the other, and in subjectivity each can come to stand for or even *become* the other, because, as the term ‘dialectical’ suggests, the relations between feelings and discourse are fluid, mobile and transformative (Cromby, under consideration).

Nevertheless, this dialectic is an imbalanced one in the sense that feelings remain the default mode of our being in the world, they supply the primordial ‘stuff’ from which experience is socially constituted. Except when we make a deliberate effort to deploy other resources, or when immediate situational demands require us to adopt an explicitly discursive rationality, we engage with our worlds in a predominantly feelingful manner. This might seem improbable, not least because as academics our training might serve to effectively render many of us professionally alexithymic.

Nevertheless, evidence and arguments suggesting that feelings are the default mode of human being can be found in neuroscience (Damasio, 1999; Panksepp, 2004), cognitive psychology (Zajonc, 1980), and most schools of psychoanalysis (Mitchell & Black, 1995).

So, socialized feelings are the default mode of our being in the world, the mode of engagement to which we return when we are not explicitly required to be otherwise. Socialized feelings are also a significant part of the frequently unacknowledged backdrop to our everyday acting and talking, such that even when we imagine that we are simply being ‘rational’ the very *form* of our rationality is likely to be one that feels appropriate to our current situation – and if it is not, we will be uncomfortably aware of this. In psychology our rationalities are usually understood to be composed of beliefs: believing that cigarettes are harmful, I don’t smoke them; believing capitalism to be unjust and inefficient, I oppose it, and so on. But what, exactly, is a belief?

Baerveldt & Voestermans (2005) argue that both cognitive and discursive psychologies tend to misconstrue belief as primarily something that is claimed or stated, rather than lived. By focusing on beliefs as functional, information-processing activity, cognitive psychology remains neutral with respect to how much people are committed to them. Discursive psychology greatly improves upon the cognitive position by understanding beliefs as dialogical productions situated and occasioned within given social contexts, but similarly fails to offer a convincing account of why people frequently continue to express certain beliefs, even when their functionality in a particular situation is questionable. As Willig (2001) puts it, discursive psychology paradoxically fails to theorise the motivations or embodied desires that underpin the notions of ‘stake’ and ‘accountability’ which are central to its analyses.

An alternative conception sees belief as something that compels and guides, something that emerges first of all in our feelingful “embodied engagements in a world we already share with others even before we come to reflect upon it” (Baerveldt & Voestermans, 2005 p.455-6). Another way of putting this is to say that faith, rather than reason, underpins belief. This is not faith in the religious sense, but faith in the sense of trust, acceptance, a tacit recognition that the world has a particular character. It is therefore similar to the notion of ‘perceptual faith’ that Merleau-Ponty developed

with regard to perception. Just as we tend to simply trust what our perceptual senses tell us about the world, so we also tend to simply trust the embodied feelings that arise spontaneously from our relationally-organised engagements with it.

In subjectivity, then, beliefs are first of all matters of socialized feeling; they are affective *before* they are instances of discursive reflection or articulation. Language is nevertheless frequently implicated in their production, inculcation, differentiation and transmission, which proceeds through the organization and availability of cultural forms and material resources. Exposure to both material and cultural influences incites us to inculcate and organize, in particular ways, the reflexive articulations upon our own feelings that we are able to produce. And importantly, these material resources and cultural forms are always already both structured by, and constitutive of, relations of power.

The influence of material resources includes the organization of space, the availability of housing, leisure and recreational facilities, and access to technologies of communication such as books, television and computers. Available material resources offer various kinds of real choices or ‘subjective possibilities’ (Tolman, 1994), and so have an immediate and direct structuring effect upon subjectivity. In addition their differential organization and allocation, in and of itself, supplies further important messages about our place in the world and the kinds of choices and options that in future we will feel are legitimate.

Cultural forms include language, but also paintings, music, architecture, sculpture, theatre, dance and so on. Alongside language and discourse, then, cultural forms embrace bodily practices, disciplines, modes of comportment; ways of using, holding and relating to our bodies; regimes of affect, their associated moral and ethical strictures, and their rules of appropriateness for experience, expression and action.

Cultural forms are also organized in lines of power, such that their availability and legitimacy tends to be systematically related to an individual’s identity and location within a given social order. In this way their influence intersects and interacts with the material realm to generate modal ways of being that we might, for example, characterize as working or middle class, masculine or feminine (Bourdieu, 1977;

Young, 1990). Consequently, in subjectivity the real material possibilities available to us, whilst crucially important, are not the only things that condition our activity. Within these constraints, our activities are typically further constrained by the cultural forms within which we have been socialized, and by which some options are frequently made to feel impossible, illegitimate, ‘not for the likes of us’.

Whilst families are clearly an important nexus of socialization and a primary site where material influences and cultural forms impact upon subjectivity, in the overall arrangement of social forces most families have relatively little power. They have somewhat more influence over the particular ways in which these resources and forms get associated with specific regimes of feeling and affect, most obviously through the prohibitions and exhortations they favour, but even here room for maneuver is limited (by social structures and positions, and their associated resources and cultural forms, and of course by the prior socialization of family members).

Moreover, families are not the only site at which socialization occurs: schools, welfare, medicine, law and of course the media also acquire significance, since each of these offers incitements to amalgamate particular feelings with specific aspects of culture and organizations of materiality. It is through our lived encounters with the material resources and cultural forms proffered at each of these sites that we learn to feel, from an early age, that government is good, business is benevolent, law is equivalent to justice, selfishness and inequality are inevitable, complacency is safe and obedience is rewarded.

So the focus on material influences and cultural forms mitigates the ‘family-blaming’ of the Reichian account. It simultaneously minimizes Reich’s intense focus on sexuality, which now appears as merely another site for contestation rather than the sole psychic key that might unlock revolutionary potential. However, in order to produce a thoroughly psychological account that allows us to understand how these socialized feelings actually come to be part of our embodied subjectivities, we will now turn to contemporary neuroscience.

Antonio Damasio’s work emphasizes the centrality of feelings to both subjectivity and decision-making. His account of the brain structures and processes by which

consciousness is generated (Damasio, 1999) suggests that feelings, which are the primary constituent of what he calls 'core consciousness', are a necessary precondition for any other kind of experience. Similarly, his 'somatic marker hypothesis' explains how socialized feelings might be acquired, experienced, and influential in our activity. Damasio (1994) proposes that through experience we learn to classify stimuli as either positive or negative, and that this learning includes a somatic component. On future occasions where this learning may be pertinent, the brain calls out patterns of bodily activity consonant with previous experience. The physiological states that were previously associated with either positive or negative outcomes then get reconstituted as feelings, *somatic markers* which stamp putative options with valences.

Somatic markers, then, are bodily states called out within streams of interaction and experienced in the form of feelings. They do *not* decide for us, but they do accelerate and simplify decision-making by reducing the set of options we must rationally consider. Moreover, their character, for each individual, reflects that person's particular history of incentives and penalties. As Damasio puts it: "Somatic markers are thus acquired by experience, under the control of an internal preference system and under the influence of an external set of circumstances which include not only entities and events with which the organism must interact, but also social conventions and ethical rules" (Damasio 1994, p.179). So the somatic marker system, like the ability to acquire language, is a part of our species-being: but, like the languages we learn, its content is a product of experiences within specific material and cultural circumstances. It functions to endow subjectivity with socialized feelings that play a significant role in decision-making.

## **Conclusion**

So, to return to Brinton's problem, the reason why most starving people don't steal and most exploited workers don't strike is because their beliefs tell them that these things are wrong, futile, dangerous, or unhelpful. But these beliefs are not mere rational-discursive formulations generated in inner speech, and they are much more than dialogical formulations produced in conversation. Instead, these beliefs are lived as affective compulsions, felt through the body, and enabled by neural systems that

place the socialized feelings from which they are constituted right at the centre of subjectivity. Beliefs are affectively instantiated, so they acquire their subjective force from the feelings that discourse subsequently fixes, articulates and differentiates.

This has numerous implications, of which I have time to briefly mention just two. First, that the felt compulsion to maintain the existing social order is not irrational in the sense that it is random, and nor is it irrational in the sense that most people subjectively experience it as an extraneous force somehow interfering with their normative tendencies towards social upheaval. Rather, most people feel that some degree of support for the existing social order is the norm, and in this sense their irrational feelings are actually experienced as wholly rational. And second, that new amalgams of feeling and discourse, new beliefs, are always being produced – or as Damasio puts it, new somatic markers are always being generated. For this reason, affective normativity is a dynamic process. The social order must be continually remade to counter the ever-present subversive push towards other forms of rationality, other beliefs, rooted in the frequently inequitable material situations and relational engagements that we actually live. It is in the contingencies of this continual remaking that we may find alternative ways to believe, to feel, and to be.

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