In the mid-1990s a new interest in the body, the senses and other non-discursive forces in social life became prominent in cultural anthropology. This interest was in part inspired by the growing popularity of the work of Gilles Deleuze, and in part inspired by a desire to get beyond dominant paradigms in the discipline, such as the virtual hegemony of a Foucauldian approach to discursive and disciplinary practices as well as a more conventional approach to cultural meaning and interpretation. The centerpiece soon became the concept of affect: the pre-discursive forces that condition the body, consciousness and the senses – sound, songs, light, images, the physical presence of bodies, the presence of the natural elements and much more.

The literature of affect takes inspiration from the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza, whose understanding of human nature was inspired by the Stoics and set against religious arguments about a unique human nature enabled by the divine spirit. To Spinoza, affects are constants in the human world – love, hate, hope, desire, fear. His project was famously to argue that under the influence of proper reason, human beings could set themselves free from religious passions and the illusions of divine laws. That would require that humans both accepted the reality of affects as inadvertent relations between people, and at the same time insisted on tempering the passions and guiding the intellect through reason.

In Deleuze, this becomes a counter-position of affect as a form of spontaneous, almost inadvertent, action of love, desire, resentment, etc. versus the mediated action guided by an ‘idea’, a mental construct. Deleuze clearly uses Spinoza to toy with categories of human action that are not mediated by language or consciousness in a conventional fashion. However, subsequent interpreters have completed Deleuze’s gesture to produce a form of ‘reverse Cartesianism’ where the body and the affects become the new protagonists as pre-discursive actors. This is particularly clear in the work of Brian Massumi, who tries to distill what he calls the ‘autonomy of affect’ as a set of forces that condition and flow through the body, only to materialize as emotion. ‘Emotion is a contamination of empirical space by affect which belongs to the body without an image’ (Massumi 2002: 61). While Massumi is interested in affect mediated through the visual, spectacles and technology, Bennett attributes the powers of affect to the sublime forces of nature, sound and ‘imperceptible’ forms of presence of other beings (Bennett 2001). Connolly boldly explores the powers of affect from the point of view of the recent breakthroughs in neuroscience and the new possibilities a more dynamic understanding of the brain and the affective as such afford our understanding of human action. (Connolly 2002).

Actual translation of these theoretical debates into anthropological work is still scant and in its infancy. While the terminology is being widely invoked across the discipline, little systematic elaboration and application has been done so far. The most systematic and interesting exception is Hirschkind’s recent work on sound, affect and emotion in what he calls the ‘Islamic counterpublics’ of Egypt (Hirschkind 2006). Here, the notion of affect as a relatively independent power associated with sound and voice is discussed and creatively adapted into a compelling ethnographic account. Yet, the relationship between emotion, consciousness and affect is never clarified, perhaps because it would have made limited ethnographic sense. The larger issue of what affect contributes to cultural
analysis in anthropology and beyond has recently been critically discussed by William Mazzarella. His question, ‘Affect, what is it good for?’ has not yet been answered in any conclusive manner. While charting the non-subjective forces and powers outlined by Spinoza, Deleuze and others is indeed relevant for anthropology, the key question is what there is to be gained from analytically isolating these phenomena from other elements and forces that structure human action and sociality.

See also: body, emotion

Further reading

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