

Europe and Emotions: between Love and Hatred, Fear and Hope

The sociological and political relevance of emotions

In all social phenomena, without exception, emotions are present and play a fundamental role. This is true for those collective phenomena in which intense emotions occupy a central place (e.g. festivals, sport competitions, the response to terrorist actions and political revolutions) as well as in more intimate social relations which are charged with lasting though often almost imperceptible feelings and which give flavour to every minor daily encounter. As a result, emotions have now been incorporated as intervening variables in substantive sociological research on such diverse topics as self-identity, gender, relationships, responses to stress, work, group solidarity, social inequality, social movements, and even global conflicts [Scheff and Retzinger, 1991]. Sociological research on emotions—since its early stages back in the 1970s—has now produced a vast amount of chief outcomes which would be out of scope of this chapter to recap here¹. However, for quite obvious reasons, emotions have now been increasingly incorporated in disciplines such as Politics, Economics and International Relations.

Almost twenty years ago, Marcus [2000] reminded us how, despite the fact that eminent predecessors such as Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, Descartes, Hume and Smith, had already highlighted the necessity to include emotions in our understanding of politics and human behaviour, political sciences have been largely dominated by cognitive accounts and by a neat division and opposition between emotion and reason. The Positivist paradigm which has dominated Western thought, but also the ephemeral and elusive nature of the concept of emotion, are mainly responsible for such a misleading dichotomy. Nevertheless, political scientists have recently managed to make up for the missed opportunities—and, during the last fifteen years, several scholars have discussed and illustrated, from different perspectives, the key role that emotions play in politics and other cognate disciplines [Clarke et al. 2006; Jasper 2006; Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Demertzis 2006; 2013; Kinnvall 2013; Cerulo 2015; Clément and Sangar 2018; Mancosu 2018; Wahl-Jorgensen 2019].

One of the challenges the study of emotions faces is related to the vast, heterogeneous nature of the word emotion itself. Today, most scholars from different disciplines tend to agree on a broad definition of emotions in terms of complex phenomena that usually involve (not always simultaneously) neurophysiological and neurochemical changes, cognitive and motivational appraisals of a situational stimulus or context, display of expressive gestures or behaviours, cultural labelling processes, and that, no doubt, are present in all facets of personal and interpersonal life. Emotions are interpretive filters which regulate our relationship with the world and which serve an essential communicative function: they tell us and others—through several signals (verbal and non-verbal communication, facial expressions, bodily changes, vocal tones, manners, behaviours, etc.)—who we are, how we manage, manifest or hide our emotions, and how we relate to the rest of the world [Barbalet 2001; Burkitt 2014; Clark 1990; Collins 2004; Hochschild 1979; 1990; Marinetti et al. 2011].

Together with different epistemological and ontological stances, different vocabularies of emotions further complicate the picture. Scholars often use labels like sentiments, feelings, affect, moods, and

¹ For a review of current sociological theories on emotions see also Turner and Stets 2005; Bericat 2016; Cerulo 2018.