



Is there hope for anger? The politics of spatializing and (re)producing an emotion

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on research that suggests some emotions are better at motivating certain political actions than others, I question whether hope constitutes what is left in geography, or simply what is *left over*. If anger is the dominant emotional response to perceptions of injustice; if it tends, more than other emotions, to impel punitive and/or preventative demands; and if it can fortify resolve to endure in the struggle for accountability, then its displacement in favour of a politics of hope must be challenged. Making sense of emotions in a politically meaningful way demands that emotions be unpacked, categorically and historically. To that end, I trace the historiography of anger, using the concept of 'feeling rules' to examine why one of our primary emotions should be rendered such a politically fragile achievement – at least for some. In conclusion, I argue that scholars holding out hope for a truly progressive politics must concern themselves as much with the absence of anger as with its excess.

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Joe, aged 45, has been working with homeless persons for over eight years. Joe talks intently about his lessons of hope in working with the poor, particularly underlining the lessons of hope learned while working with Mother Teresa on the streets of Calcutta. [...]

*"When I think of hope," Joe [says], "I think of a quote from St. Augustine that goes something like this: 'Hope has two lovely daughters, Anger at the way things are and Courage to change them.' I think both of these [anger and courage] are part of the energy that drives me."*¹

There is something about geography's 'emotional turn' that feels rather misguided. Lost amid the cut and thrust of theoretical debates over the respective virtues of affect and emotion (Anderson, 2006; Anderson and Harrison, 2006; McCormack, 2003, 2006; Thien, 2005; Thrift, 2004) is a much needed and more grounded discussion of how *specific* emotions are spatialized and (re)produced across time. That "emotions are an intensely political issue" (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7) seems no longer under dispute; however, I want to suggest that the tendency to isolate emotions "[a]t particular times and in particular places" (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7) or, conversely, to declare that affect is a "constant" across

all time and place (Thrift, 2004: 58), hampers our capacity to make sense of how we think about what we feel – *and why*. Emotions have yet to be categorically and historically unpacked. Perhaps this is because scholars have been encouraged to "get away from the idea that some root kind of emotion (like shame) can act as a key political cipher" (Thrift, 2004: 59). But what is to be made of the assertion that "some emotions are better at motivating certain [political] actions than others" (Pagano and Huo, 2007: 229)? Even those who dismiss the political salience of 'some root kind of emotion' find themselves, at one and the same time, arguing in favour of a politics of hope (Thrift, 2004).² In fact, on some accounts, it seems hope is the best we can hope for (Amin and Thrift, 2005; Anderson, 2006; Chatterton, 2006; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006). And yet, I am not convinced that much critical attention has been given to *why* feeling hopeful now finds fashion in the academy, or even to whether hope is the right emotion to impel a progressive politics. In this paper, I question whether "spaces of hope" constitute "what is Left" in geography (Amin and

² My purpose here is not to argue that hope constitutes one of the "basic emotions" (Ekman, 1992), nor to debate whether hope is more correctly defined as an emotion or an attitude. On the latter point, I concur with those who take the position that "any theory of emotion must eventually deal with the emotions as they are conceptualized and experienced in everyday affairs" (Averill, [1980] 2005: 247). Hope has been recognized as an emotion in the everyday affairs of scholars in a wide range of disciplines, from philosophy (e.g. Bloch, 1986; Nussbaum, 2001) and psychology (e.g. Averill et al., 1990; Lazarus, 1999), to sociology (e.g. Jasper, 1998), geography (e.g. Wood and Smith, 2004) and commerce (e.g. MacInnis and de Mello, 2005).

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¹ 'Joe' participated in a study on the experience of hope among people working with the homeless (Schmidt Bunkers, 1999). The quote to which he refers, attributed to St. Augustine, is as follows: *Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are Anger and Courage; Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.*

Thrift, 2005), or simply what is *left over* – a celebratory “optimism of the intellect”³ (Harvey, 2000; see also Hage, 2003) sustained by little more than a perceived lack of *reasonable* alternatives. Swimming against the current of the pedantically hopeful, I contend that enlightened optimism is not enough in a world where two of every five people live in poverty (HDR, 2007) and where hunger kills 18,000 children a day (WFP, 2006). Hope may nourish contemporary academic theory, but as the May 2008 issue of *NGO World* makes clear, people in the throws of precarity are, practically speaking, hungry and *angry*.⁴

Daring to question the place of hope and, arguably worse still, to defend the political salience of anger is contentious terrain. It is not my intent to make light of either the potential for hope to “bring new forms of politics into being” (Thrift, 2004: 75) or the potential for anger to go deadly wrong. What I challenge is the idea that anger *necessarily* leads to negative sociopolitical outcomes and should, therefore, be avoided. I draw on Aristotle’s concept of practical wisdom in defending a place for anger. For Aristotle (1954: 96–97), practical wisdom is the hallmark of a ‘good-tempered person’, a person who tends “to be angry in the manner, at the thing, and for the length of time, that the rule”.⁵ I join scholars who argue that anger so dispensed holds virtue (Haydon, 1999). This is a conditional position, similar in many respects to the stand taken on shame, which is regarded as “immensely productive politically and conceptually in advancing a project of everyday ethics”, *even though* “not all uses of shame are good” (Probyn, 2004: 329, 346). As with shame, descriptions of anger are generally differentiated according to whether anger is considered an emotion (rendering descriptions with a cognitive bias) or an affect (rendering descriptions with a biological bias). I focus on the former, narrowing my concern further still by isolating the first of three ‘objectives’ of anger, namely correction for perceived injustice (Domagalski and Steelman, 2007: 298).⁶

My defense of anger is guarded. But I want to underscore that it is precisely because anger seems to have been so effectively displaced in favour of a politics of hope that scholars should pay greater attention to its possibilities and question ever more closely how it is managed. We must ask not only why anger – one of our ‘primary’ emotions (Demoulin et al., 2004; Ekman, 1992; Jasper, 1997; Kemper, 1987) – should be rendered a “politically fragile achievement” (Campbell, 1994: 47), but also why it should “routinely disqualif[y] writing from academic status” (Keith, 1992: 551). Moreover, as geographers, we must examine how topographies of emotion unfold and take stock of the role we play in that process. Calls to celebrate the nomadic wanderlust of a politics of hope must always be measured against accounts of situated, actually existing sites of anger: in Argentina (Bosco, 2006), in Bosnia (Ó Tuathail, 1996), in South Africa (Kobayashi, 2005), and in the Global South more generally (Sundberg, 2007).

1. Emotions in the pipeline

How do we make sense of emotions in a politically meaningful way? Moving away from embodied sentiment, the argument has been “for a navigation of feeling which goes beyond the simple romanticism of somehow maximising individual emotions” (Thrift, 2004: 68). Not without controversy, affect has been described as “a constant of urban experience”, which today is “more and more likely to be actively engineered with the result that it is becoming more akin to the networks of pipes and cables that are of such importance in providing the basic mechanics and root textures of urban life” (Thrift, 2004: 58). The critical challenge to this view suggests that it is too masculinist, too mechanistic and too far removed from the lived experiences of an emotional (human) subject (Thien, 2005). This position, in turn, has drawn criticism for “veering toward emotional fundamentalism” (McCormack, 2006: 332).

My sense is that the affect versus emotion debate is off-track. Conceptualizing affect as an assemblage of pipes and cables is a useful metaphor. But rather than allowing the concept to lure us toward a post-human imaginary – where everything is a possibility and, therefore, impossible to (dis)prove – scholars should work to reverse-engineer it, to situate it in the particulars of lived experience in order to understand how disparities in emotional landscapes are produced. To argue that affect is a constant obscures the fact that *specific* emotions are subject to *specific* forms of engineering, which, while not wholly resistant to reconfiguration, often become sedimented through time. Pipes and cables do, in many ways, symbolize an assemblage of modernity, an urban infrastructure laid out in particular ways, to serve particular purposes for particular people; an infrastructure that may be felt as much by its absence as by its presence. The point is well made by Gloria Reina Santos Montes, a Honduran woman who, when first introduced to feminism and told it was about a redistribution of power, is said to have responded: “I don’t care what you call it, I just want to feed my babies and maybe someday shit in a toilet” (paraphrased in Sacks, 1997: 142–143).

Clearly, pipes and cables *matter*. Emotion and technology are brought into relation through a civilizing discourse that is less about what is post-human than about what is *properly* human. Shitting in a toilet is a triumph of the ‘civilizing process’ (Elias, 1978), a process arguably less concerned with hygiene (Goudsblom, 1986) and more concerned with asserting new codes of conduct based on “delicacy of feeling” (Elias, 1978: 115, 116). The pipes and cables that make civilized defecation possible are not simply value-neutral, space-conquering conduits or mere theoretical fodder for a politics of hope; they are practical wants linked to a process of social conditioning and differentiation. If, for some, pipes and cables offer inspiration and hope, then for others, including the 2.6 billion people across the globe lacking adequate sanitation (HDR, 2006), they symbolize deprivation and give (reasonable) cause for anger.

Should one feel hopeful in the face of another’s misfortune? Aristotle (2001: 214) argues that there are some things about which we *ought* to be angry. Legitimate anger, according to Aquinas (1947), arises from something done to us or to another with whom we feel a connection, “either by some kinship or friendship, or at least because of the nature we have in common”. Post-humanists may well argue that what we have in common with others need not take corporeal form, that humans are common to something beyond our humanity. In theory, I am not entirely insensitive to this position; in practice, however, I am not prepared to tell Gloria Reina Santos Montes she is just one of many species that does not have a toilet to shit in, or that she should be hopeful because one day technology will allow all species to dispose of their excrement in a civilized manner. Whether or not scholars envision something

³ Harvey twists the call made famous by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci for “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will” (Gramsci, 1971: xxi).

⁴ *NGO World* is a development research magazine published in Lahore, Pakistan. The cover of its May 2008 issue is a photo montage: a backdrop of parched, cracked earth from which appear outstretched hands holding small plastic bags to be filled with rations. The image is overlaid with the words ‘Hungry and Angry’.

⁵ The ‘rule’ for Aristotle is not set in stone but is guided by the judgment of the good-tempered person. See Haydon (1999) for an expansion of this argument.

⁶ The other two objectives of anger are: (1) to assert social status, and (2) to exact revenge (Domagalski and Steelman, 2007: 298). I am not certain that these are mutually exclusive categories. For my purposes here, however, correction of perceived injustice is understood as the primary objective under study.

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