

**Dierdra Reber, *Coming to Our Senses: Affect and An Order of Things for Global Culture*
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Affect is everywhere. Theories of feeling, sensation and the capacities of bodies to generate and transfer feelings and sensations flood the academic market at the moment. The fields of Biblical Studies, Antiquity Studies, and Early Christian Studies have obviously been flooded by this tide, if in piecemeal ways. But across such disparate fields as cognitive science, anthropology, literary analysis, psychoanalysis, philosophy, political science, and cultural studies, it would seem that academia has a case of the feels. Hailing not only the end of Cartesian daydreams of the thinking, reasoning, autonomous subject, but also the linguistic turn's stubbornly defiant attachment to the power of talk, affective analyses command us to lift our gaze, stop speaking finally, and *just feel*. Touch. Experience culture coursing through our bodies; sense the electricity of others, the kinship with our larger ecology and the world of things. In this story, this fantasy of revolution, we awakened from our evaluative drowse, we marveled, and asked: how did we not feel all this before?

With *Coming to Our Senses*, here we are re-awakened, as Reber breathlessly describes how the rise of affective theories and analyses is itself no innovation. Rather, their rise is a function of the "capitalist-democratic complex" which privileges, even operates on, feeling as rival of rational thought. Corporations like Coca-Cola and Nike craft and propagate a public that is "all heart, no brain." There's nothing like a good Marxist intervention to toss cold water on your aspirations for deep epistemological change.

Reber collates a somewhat quirky cluster of cultural examples from the United States and Latin America. She addresses the sensed collectivity of social media and crowdsourcing, though largely concentrates on films and corporate ads. She points to the ways in which the notion of the oneness and health of the social body – conceptualized as a headless, sensing *soma* -- is a capitalist regulatory framework that cuts across the political spectrum. She also describes (quite satisfyingly) Negri and Hardt's totalizing vision of global empire, for instance, as a "symptomatic cultural analysis – analysis informed by the culture it diagnoses" (74). Even the horizontal longings and interspecies affections of the posthumanist turn appear in Reber's book as a function of a free-market democracy, since it imagines an "egalitarian organicity of interspecies interconnectedness, an interconnectedness figured overwhelmingly in the postulate of emotion as a shared faculty" (179).

Reber's discontent with affect as a primary currency in contemporary culture is perhaps even more understandable after the 2017 U.S. election. But her combined Marxist and Foucaultian commitments mean not only an insistence on periodization (affect as late capitalist episteme). These commitments also mean she is unable to

entertain multiple, frictive, or contradictory epistemologies operating simultaneously. Affect theory hasn't universally imagined health and wholeness as ideals or in social homeostatic terms (see Cvetkovich 2012 for example, which read depression as a social symptom). Likewise, race-critical posthumanist interventions (e.g., Chen 2012; Weheliye 2014) don't conjure anything like a healthful, totalizing ecology or warm and fuzzy interspecies affiliations.

Scholars of antiquity will see Reber's diagnoses as echoing ancient terms and conceptualities, as her use of *soma* suggests. The homeostatic body characterized by flow echoes Hippocrates's humors model, for instance, and it's hard not to hear Paul's voice in Corinthians whispering in the background as she speaks of the spookiness of love as the tie that binds the social body together in ambivalent and inextricable relation. The ancient social body, however, was not a headless one, and waves of feeling were (at least for Stoics) largely thought to be interruptions or distractions of the mind/self. Reber, reflecting not only these ancient ideals but modernist priorities as well, positions affect as in contradistinction with reason (a subtitle to her introduction is "The New Cogito: 'I Feel, Therefore I am'"). In fact her concluding line is an exhortation that takes the form of a reactionary recuperation of the rational subject: "In order to comprehend discourses of power in its contestation alike in a world defined by capitalist democracy, we – the 'we' of the title of this book, the we who inhabit that world – must come to our senses: we need to comprehend, in rational terms, emotional language and its epistemic rendition in the figure of the feeling soma" (254).

"Rational" here operates as a rhetorical claim (as it often does) about what constitutes reality. I don't object to the critique of capitalism, far from it, or even the notion that theories of affect are a symptom of their moment. What isn't? And in a world of alternative facts, who couldn't sympathize with a desire for more analytical precision? Yes, we certainly do need to think more, and think more carefully, about how feeling operates in contemporary cultural, political, and economic structures. But what I wonder about is the trust in the stone-cold Marxist disenchantment (the hermeneutics of suspicion that Sedgwick so roundly satirized in *Touching Feeling*), paired with an almost nostalgic desire for the respectable posture of enlightenment ideals and a certain kind of Cartesianism.

I say "a certain kind of Cartesianism" because Descartes, like that other key figure in rationalist philosophical genealogies, Baruch Spinoza, who imagined the world as imbued with affect, is actually not an easy reference point for rationalist projects, as more and more scholars (Lisa Shapiro, Gordon Baker and Katherine Morris, e.g.) have begun to notice. He thus also does not make for a very good target for the "post-Cartesian" critiques. But he does offer some good resources for reflection on the history and impulses for a rational subject, as well as a cautionary tale for the state of affect theory in the present. Indeed if Descartes' *Cogito* was grounded in an aspirational body/soul dualism, that dualism was the product less of a sudden, clean severing than a long and arduous surgery that stretched across time and volumes. Descartes's last published volume, *The Passions of the Soul*, for instance, is a delicate address to the problem of the *connection* of the body and the soul: he must make their connection logically compatible with their separateness. But of course their

connection is such a “problem” because the enmeshment of the body and soul is both obvious and assumed for a living human being – the burden of proof is on the *separability* of the soul from the body.

What is stunning about Descartes’s text is the remarkably biological account of the soul, as well as its passions. The passions often come with changes in the blood, spleen, liver or heart. Love, for instance, increases the pulse and is therefore good for health (Article 102); joy (his objective) is described in deeply physiological terms, too (Article 104). The soul is in fact united to the body in an organ, the famous pineal gland in the center of the brain. Descartes wants the soul sequestered from too much agitation, and so he seats it in the instrument of intellection. But even this intellectual resolution is interrupted by the problem of feeling, and Descartes must give an explanation of how the heart is included in the motion of the passions in order to justify why the soul feels “as if it were chiefly in the heart” (Article 36, 1650 ed., translator unknown). How does the soul, seated in the brain, *feel as if* it were in the heart, which, funnily enough, doubles here as both circulatory and sensory organ? For this brief and crucial moment, the carefully cloistered soul appears lost among the human machine’s pumping, touching, sensing, feeling, and knowing.

It is perhaps not surprising that this final volume which tries to fortify the fragile and emerging Cartesian subject must speak about the “passions” – which include wonder, delight, love, hate, sadness, and revulsion. The experience of emotions as “more” than bodily, but still somehow deeply bodily, confounds any easy split between soul and body. And the relationship of these passions to the soul is bound up from the start with anxiety – the passions “agitate” the soul. The more strenuously the Cartesian binary is written, the more taxed the binary becomes: the final plea in Descartes’s text is that the soul “overcomes” these passions, a Stoic philosophy-inspired vision of an unaffected state. But the desired culmination of such self-control is actually affectively driven: “[T]he principle use of prudence or self-control,” Descartes writes, “is that it teaches us to be masters of our passions, and to so control and guide them that the evils which they cause are quite bearable, and that we even derive joy from them all” (Article 212). This capstone sentence suggests that if the “Cartesian subject” centers around a rationality/emotionality split, that split derives from a desire to *make life more bearable* – a mitigation of discomfort and pain.

Contemporary theory has exhaustively outlined the many limits and power differentials embedded in Cartesian subjectivity, or at least those of its ambitions. We also might note, perhaps obviously, that modern capitalism emerged alongside the “Cartesian subject,” lending any anti-capitalist return to “reason” some irony. But if Reber is calling into being a renewed interest in Cartesian self-understanding – a return to the thinking subject – it also seems important to notice how a subject that stands on any kind of strong distinction between thinking and feeling, heart versus brain, is actually quite feeble, and lost within its very articulation. Descartes offers us a cautionary tale, lest we forget that the epistemology of feeling is, like feeling itself, unwieldy and plural. What we need in this political moment is perhaps not deeper differentiations between thinking and feeling as domains of experience, but finer descriptions of their inextricability – a connectedness that is both obvious and inscrutable.

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