The ‘Turn to Affect’ in Social Research: A Critique and an Argument for Affective Practice

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In recent years a large-scale ‘turn to affect’ has been evident across the social sciences, as social researchers have become increasingly dissatisfied with approaches based on discourse and talk and texts. There has been a huge explosion of work on the ‘psychological’, on emotion, memory, influence and suggestion in disciplines as diverse as political science, social policy and cultural geography. Researchers are newly interested in the roller coasters of passion, contempt, patriotism, hate and euphoria which power public scenes. How do social formations grab individuals? How do we explain people’s investments in their identities and the depth of their attachments?

This talk will examine this new turn to affect and the research questions it opens up, in particular for feminist scholars analysing the connections between emotion, power and privilege. I will explore what is interesting about these new developments and critically review some of the main theoretical trajectories such as Eve Sedgwick and Adam Franks’ use of the writings of Silvan Tomkins, Brian Massumi’s mash up of Deleuze plus Spinoza plus bits of experimental psychology, and Nigel Thrift’s Non-Representational Theory. I will be arguing that new theory in this area and, particularly, new empirical research needs to be grounded in analyses of the affective-discursive. The rubric of practice is still the most generative way forward.