
From the ashes, a fertile opportunity for historicism – Review Symposium on Leys’s *The Ascent of Affect*

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journals.sagepub.com/home/hhs**Rob Boddice** 

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Ruth Leys, *The Ascent of Affect: Genealogy and Critique*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017, 416 pages, ISBN: 022648856X

Ruth Leys’s book is a thorough survey of the unmanaged forest and scrubland of emotion research: a hodgepodge of paradigmatic ideas that amounts to so much kindling. To most of this, Leys holds a match and allows us to stand in awe at the conflagration. In an ideal world, the psychologists would be watching too. Emotion research in psychological bowers is the heir to an epistemological inertia born of force of personality. Leys’s book is a genealogy of ideas, yes, but it is also, and principally, a genealogy of academic clientelism, and of men (mostly) whose convictions, assumptions, arrogance, politics, and outright scientism have permitted, imposed, and policed two generations of faulty thinking. The jig is up.

Leys opens her book with the observation that emotion researchers merrily pursue their pet theories and methodologies in the pages of *Emotion Review* without the slightest acknowledgement that such theories have been criticized. Indeed, criticism across the current schism in the discipline of psychology – between Basic Emotions Theory (BET) and bioconstruction – seems to be managed either by pretending the schism is not there, or out of a genuine ignorance of its existence. It remains an active question how psychologists attain any kind of research coherence when they do not properly address their intractable differences. More importantly, they seem also to overlook work on emotions

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in other disciplines that ought, if it were countenanced, directly to impact both what they do and how they do it. To that end, Leys's book should cause an almighty stir, but as with so much else that has been styled a history of the emotions, I am not sure if psychologists will be moved to read it or weigh its implications.

The idea of universal facial expressions and the universal affects that dwell beneath them remains, unchecked, at the heart of multiple psychological fields and major strands of neuroscientific research. Criticism has come from all sides, and not least from Leys herself over many years, but it continues to be ignored. And I do mean *ignored*. Criticism of the idea of a universal set of expressions is routinely not addressed by psychologists whose work depends on this notion. As Leys points out in her opening salvo, where such criticism is inconvenient to a particular psychological research endeavour, it is simply and wilfully overlooked.

Reading Leys's account, it seems the whole edifice of Affect Theory was built on such selective blindness and lack of critical oversight. There is a striking digression in the opening chapter on Tomkins and his influence, showing Tomkins' intellectual debt to Charles Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, and in turn to Duchenne de Boulogne, on whom Darwin drew for his understanding of the universal face (pp. 51–5). This is picked up again in the following chapter, on Ekman (pp. 76–7, 85–8). The way in which Leys unpacks Duchenne's methodology strikingly exposes the methodological and epistemological flaws that were, from the first, built into Affect Theory's own attempt to demonstrate a universal set of affective facial expressions. The absence of 'authentic' feeling in the photographed subject, manipulated to depict a predefined image of authenticity, was coupled with an insistence on an absolute distinction between natural and feigned expression. This flaw shot through Duchenne's work and was recapitulated by Darwin. It was carried through the influential work of Tomkins and, more profoundly, Ekman.

Yet this is not even the most striking thing about this passage. That distinction falls to an implication between the lines. Tomkins, and Zajonc and Ekman after him, fell upon Darwin's *Expression* – an odd outlier in the Darwinian canon – and boosted it. Ekman even attached himself to it directly, introducing and critically annotating a new edition so as to clarify in contemporary terms what he thought Darwin meant. Darwin, in his evolutionary work on universal expression, was right, the affect theorists claimed. The problem is that in *Expression* Darwin abandoned natural selection almost entirely, relying upon inherited habit as an explanatory guide for how expressions became associated with emotions, even though they were not functionally communicative of emotions strictly speaking. Darwin was trying to undo, wholesale, the work of Charles Bell, whose own universal face depended on intelligent design. In so doing, Darwin threw out his own best theory, and with it the logic of the evolution of emotions that had been so evident in his *Descent of Man*. *Expression* is his most Lamarckian work. Reading volume one of *Descent* against *Expression*, which was published the following year, one is struck by an evolutionary theorist bamboozled by criticism, self-doubt, and overreach.¹ The promotion of *Expression* as a model for Affect Theory in the second half of the 20th century was either a wilfully selective but tenacious bout of wishful thinking, or else an outrageously intellectually dishonest sleight of hand. Either way, the whole 'face of affect' debacle, which penetrates deeply into 'western' cultural common knowledge

about emotions via such Ekman-inspired products as Fox's *Lie To Me*, or Pixar-Disney's *Inside Out*, was built on the most unstable of foundations. Much later in Leys's book, Fridlund's observation about this misreading of Darwin is mentioned (p. 232). If he didn't clear away those shaky foundations, Leys's book should.

Particularly striking in Leys's book is her condemnation not only of Tomkins, Ekman, and allies, but also of their opponents, the cognitivist/intentionalists. They are condemned for failing to assert with sufficient intellect the other side of the argument, missing or misunderstanding key insights from philosophy and phenomenology. Thus, for example, Lazarus comes off as well meaning but ultimately dimwitted. The assessment is interesting enough in its own right as part of Leys's story, but what are the implications? At the heart of Leys's narrative is a sense that this was never a *debate* about what emotions or affects are and how they work, but two rhetorical or ideological positions: non-cognitive/non-intentional and cognitive/intentional. One came with the weight of power and influence but was fundamentally false; the other lacked influential purchase because it was disciplinarily diffuse and, crucially, because its professors were not smart enough to fully understand what was fundamentally true.

Looking now at the landscape of emotion research across the disciplines, we find two positions still. I would characterize the divide as between universalism and constructivism (the constructivist problem, considered broadly, is largely avoided by Leys), and it is presented as a *debate* within psychology, even though it remains nothing of the sort. What has become eminently clear through the convergence of cultural anthropology (especially Margaret Lock's notion of local or situated biology), social neuroscience (especially Lisa Feldman Barrett's insistence on the formational power of conceptual contingency), and the history of emotions (the notion that affective experience changes over time) is that both positions – universalist and constructivist – are wrong.² We are moving towards biocultural dynamics in which nature/nurture or culture/biology dyads are defunct. In the process, the old 'debate' should also be swept away.

Here I think there is more to be made of the neurohistory project initiated by Daniel Lord Smail, which Leys takes to task towards the end of her book. Smail himself has recently cemented his commitment to something fundamentally automatic and unconscious at the root of the human being, but it is fair to say that he has also been alive to critical revision. His original observation that 'culture writes to nature' has the obvious correlative that nature also writes to culture, and in turn the distinction between the two categories collapses into dynamic entanglement. I have argued (Boddice, 2018b), as have others (McGrath, 2017), that the general tenor of the neurohistory argument necessitates the rejection of any form of biological determinism, reductionism, or automaticity, precisely because the neuroplasticity at the heart of the project is hitched to cultural contingencies that are not only formative of human brain-body systems but also formed *by* them, and not without intention. Indeed, situated biology seems directly to invite the study of human power dynamics and politics, social encounter and exchange, as well as the instruments of dissemination of dominant ideas and ideologies, in order to understand the social and technological changes that in turn affect brains and bodies. Any appeal to core affect or ancient evolutionary adaptations must be an appeal to the human outside of culture, which, to my mind, is to appeal to something not human at all. Once biocultural dynamics are an accepted part of the story, there is no longer the option to

parcel bits of the human off as in some way ‘purely’ biological. This opens the gates to context, meaning, significance, situated practice, sociality, and so on. If the neurohistorical project to historicize the brain-body is serious, then it also must take seriously the specific cultural webs of significance that those brain-bodies make and in which they are held.

This is about taking the culture component of bioculture seriously, without reproducing the culture/biology dyad. I have argued that the turn to the social and cultural among some psychologists – the one note of hope in Leys’s book – has pulled them almost unwittingly (though quite consciously, in the case of Fridlund) into the sphere of the humanities. Historians of emotion (and anthropologists too) make knowledge claims that have direct bearing on what social psychologists and social neuroscientists are doing, precisely because they know how to theorize, ask questions about, and research the world – *culture* – which in psychological works often gets reduced to a strange and unexplored category: ‘the external’. ‘The external’ has become massively implicated in the discipline of psychology, at least for those psychologists who understand there to be a dynamic relation between brain and world. Without it, research into development, consciousness, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, empathy, collectivity, and so on seems to be impossible. Yet ‘the external’ in psychological writing remains a vague collection of material and sensory information, uninteresting in itself to psychologists until it interacts with the body-mind. Only then, when the exterior registers on the interior, do psychologists seem to switch on. Yet the increasing acknowledgement of various forms of plasticity – biological, neurological, epigenetic, homeostatic, interoceptive – demands that psychologists know how to interrogate the world. If Leys’s book is successful in exposing the bogus methodology and knowledge claims of much of emotion science, what is left is the possibility of critical collaboration with those areas of psychology that Leys finds more encouraging. We might build methodological bridges that connect social neuroscience’s focus on the effects of the world on the brain-body with historians’ and anthropologists’ focus on the effects of brain-bodies on the world.

There are massive institutional barriers to this, and cultural ones too. I am under no false illusions about the magnitude of the paradigm to be shifted. Leys’s story should have ended with Fridlund in 1994. It did not. Affect Theory and BET are zombie theories, preying on research funding and public brains. The sheer convenience of these paradigms – the fact that they are both so wonderfully flexible and reductive – has led to their further entrenchment and, crucially, to their popularization, both beyond the discipline of psychology and beyond academic bowers. I note with some irony that Lisa Feldman Barrett’s emphasis on the importance of cultural norms concerning emotion concepts – the bioconstructionist view – might suggest that if enough people come to believe there are six basic emotions that look a certain way then, by the power of neuroplasticity, they will become so. Leys herself hints at this (p. 284). So long as there remains a research industry, coupled to powerful institutional and funding entanglements, it seems not to matter that this research is built upon false premises.

I can attest anecdotally to the kinds of soft barrier that stand in the way of a more final death to Affect Theory and BET. Editors of psychology journals, for example, tell me that pointed criticism – the kind that Leys exemplifies – is best avoided. Moreover, journals have guidelines concerning predefined definitions of ‘emotion’ and ‘affect’

when writing about these categories that precisely work against critical engagement. Disrupting such ironclad definitions to hold them up as unhelpful essentialisms, as Leys does, is at the very core of cultural-historical criticism, but it is all for naught if psychology as a whole refuses to pay attention. Psychologists might have already accessed the history of emotions' critical stance via the history of psychology, especially since it is common for historians of that discipline to have received their degrees from departments of psychology. But it seems that the way in which indices of history of psychology publications are compiled and used tends to make relevant research outside of this narrow focus invisible (Burman, 2018). This includes most of the scholarship in the history of emotions over the past two decades, which some psychologists have read but which, it is surely safe to say, most have not. Perhaps Leys's book, and a review symposium such as this, will cause a change. But if Fridlund's position was a 'tough sell' (p. 366), then Leys's would seem to be no less so. As an historian of psychology in the midst of a psychology department told me, with some exasperation, psychologists don't really read books because that is not the medium for peer-reviewed research in their discipline. When criticism happens in a different model of academic publishing, it might be as though it is not happening at all. When criticism does happen with psychology, as has recently been the case with Lisa Feldman Barrett's attempt to sever the head of the BET zombie, it is all too easily ducked.³ The Paul Ekman Group's website has a page dedicated to Feldman Barrett, which makes a direct appeal to the rightness of 'Darwin's Claim' about 'Universals in Facial Expression'. Feldman Barrett is said to 'undermine the science', with Ekman coming to the rescue 'so that the public is not misled'. The piece is glib but powerful. At time of writing, it is topped with a banner for 'SpringSavings' offering 20% off the Ekman Library (regular price, \$299 per year) (Ekman and Keltner, 2014).

Despite all this, I am sanguine about the future, and perhaps more so than many of my colleagues in the history of emotions. Leys, I think, hits with sufficient force to command attention. The institutional barriers will withstand the heat for longer, such is the magnitude of political and financial investment and inertia in prevailing psychological orthodoxies. But they too must ultimately smell what is cooking. There is a real opportunity for bioculturally aware psychologists to reinforce the status of biocultural dynamics in psychology as a whole by reaching out to those anthropologists and historians who would both support them and develop their thinking. There is an equal opportunity for scholars in the humanities to capitalize on the biocultural opportunity presented by some psychologists to reclaim the body-mind as cultural-historical artefact. As things stand, there is some movement from the humanities, and I am beginning to see openings from sympathetic psychologists. It is through action in concert that the Tomkins/Ekman paradigm will fall, and concerted effort must perforce be interdisciplinary.

To that end, a few years ago I started to knock on the doors of emotion scientists. Some doors shut in my face. Others tentatively opened. Yet others were thrown wide with enthusiasm. This has led to some promising possibilities. Through contacts at the Division of Transcultural Psychiatry at McGill, for example, I found a group of scholars, notably Laurence Kirmayer and Suparna Choudhury, ready to receive and make use of biocultural historicism and to alert me to critical approaches, especially to neuroscience, within their own discipline.⁴ There is a partial awareness of some emotion work in the

humanities, especially that of William Reddy, but a show-and-tell of our respective critical bodies of work seemed to result in puzzle pieces that might be made to fit together. At the summer programme of the Swiss Center for Affective Sciences in Geneva in 2018, I found an audience of developmental psychologists who were prepared to listen to the biocultural possibilities that emotional historicism implies. Meetings such as this have led to the inclusion of historical perspectives and direct challenges to the prevailing paradigm within psychological publications (for example, Boddice, 2019). This, it strikes me, is perhaps the best way that historians' knowledge claims about emotions can become visible to psychologists. There is still no guarantee of being read, of course, but there is less chance of being completely ignored.

Leys's book ends with a general appraisal of the turn to affect across the disciplines. I think I can safely say that this chapter is already part of the history of the history of emotions. The trouble with working in such a fast-moving field is that the time between the aiming at the target and the retelling of the shooting (namely, reviews like this) leads to a reflection about how the target never stopped moving, however mortally wounded it might have seemed when shot. It remains true at time of writing that some disciplines are badly infected by Affect Theory. I have documented some of this myself, with exasperation. Those supporters of Affect Theory who wish to retain recourse to the autonomic and automatic, for whatever intellectual or political reason, must be given pause for thought by Leys. But it strikes me that history and neurohistory have reached a critical moment where the infection is being rooted out. Certainly, many historians of emotion would appear as viciously sceptical as Leys herself. This field in particular is developing rapidly, along with historicist interpretations of the senses and of experience *per se*.⁵ There is an impetus not merely to incorporate affect into the historical research agenda – to write histories about emotion, without thinking too much about what 'emotion' is – but to assert that the uncovering and reconstruction of affective experience in the past in all its strangeness is an empirical boost to the anti-BET school in psychology. Historians, increasingly, are demonstrating the foolishness of claims to universality and biological reductionism by showing that the evidence from the past does not support them. But there is evidence of other things, other ways of feeling and experiencing, other ways of expressing and communicating, both verbally and bodily, which can be *documented*. And these findings ought to carry great weight with psychologists of the bioconstructionist school. It seems strange, on reflection, that the historical profession ever entertained any notion of transhistorical universality about *anything*, let alone something so fundamental as, for want of a better phrase, 'human nature'. Surely, historians at least will not be able to ignore Leys, who must finally put an end to the casual fad of putting emotions in historical narratives willy-nilly. Historians' increasingly acute focus on affective change over time, part of an ambitious project to historicize the human and human experience, to fully embrace the collapse of dualist thinking, is much more befitting a discipline whose *métier* is diachrony.

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Notes

1. This is documented by Dixon (2003) and by Boddice (2016). Daniel Gross (2010) has made an endeavour to interpret *Expression* as a more coherent part of the Darwinian canon, and indeed has pointed out that its universalist veneer is shattered by Darwin's own historicist interpretation of emotions and their expression.
2. Lock's most recent iteration of this concept, in which she denies the capacity of science to solve the problem of nature versus nurture because the duality is fundamentally false, can be found in Lock and Pálsson (2016).
3. One thing that goes unmentioned by Leys is Feldman Barrett's awareness of the importance of whole bodies in the reception and significance of emotional expression, which further massively undermines the BET focus on the face alone. Feldman Barrett's work was collated, summarized, and popularized in her recent (2017) book. The timing of this important book, in addition to Feldman Barrett's election to the presidency of the Association for Psychological Science, meant that they weren't included in Leys's analysis. Her final chapter, 'Where we are now', already has the ring of 'where we were then' about it.
4. For examples of transcultural psychiatry's critical engagement with, and complication of, neuroscientific modelling of mental disorders, see Kirmayer and Crafa (2014) and Choudhury and Kirmayer (2009).
5. Leys's book appeared just before my own (Boddice, 2018a), which in many ways demonstrates that the history of emotions is critically further ahead than in Leys's appraisal. Historicism is not merely a check against neuroscientific hubris, but a critical contributor to the understanding of human experience as biocultural construction. See also Smith (2008).

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