

Exploring Affect and Politics

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The two books under review represent insightful contributions to two current trends in political thought: the attempt to recognize the role of emotional life in politics, and the attempt to encourage (North American) political theorists to engage with non-Western theory. By coincidence, in talking about radically different aspects of affect, they also demonstrate the wide variety of interests and concerns that bring scholars to these issues.

Denise Riley's book is a phenomenology of affect in our day-to-day use of language. Her goal is to try to attune us to how language affects us, so that we can become more self-aware and effective actors, in political life and elsewhere. She does this by trying to stake out a middle ground between two conceptions of language. On one hand is the view that speakers wield language precisely, like a tool—that we do things with words. On the other hand is the view that language is a relatively stable and impersonal force that pushes us around—that words do things to us. Riley argues that neither of these theories fully explains our experience. Speakers frequently discover that their words have a life of their own, while listeners discover that the effects of language are rarely as certain as those of the proverbial sticks and stones. As Riley describes it, rather than being a tool or a fate, language is “that outward unconscious which hovers between people” (p. 4).

Riley's solution to the uncontrollable and unpredictable emotional impact of language is to both recognize and cultivate a Stoic indifference. For example, sometimes the best way to overcome words that wound is by seeing the malediction as an impersonal thing. The speaker cast the curse in a moment and forgot it immediately. At the same time, the word itself has no deep connection with me—it does not name any truth about my self. She writes, “I have to let it go indifferently, as a thing to which I myself have become as indifferent as the bad word itself had really been, all along, to me” (p. 23).

This theme runs through nearly all of her lyrical dissections of our experience of language, which include the oddness of agreeing that one used to be beautiful; the relationship between loneliness and the public/private distinction; the compromise between action and despair expressed by asking, “Why me?”; the role that being afraid to disrupt linguistic/cultural convention might play in causing accidental pregnancy; the horrible feeling that your true but conventional excuse is heard as a lie; the frustration of having only prudish or childishly vulgar language for sex talk; the impossibility of responding to the charge “If you pro-choice folks had your way, I wouldn't be here”; and finally the unsettling mix of self and nonself that is one's given name.

Riley's close observations of language do generally support her argument that language both eludes our attempts to control it and fails to affect us in a fully deterministic fashion. When it comes to language, we are never entirely either subject or object. However, I am less convinced that her attempts to relate this to agency and politics are successful. I have two kinds of concerns, both of them traditional worries about the politics of ataraxia. The first is about the effect of cultivated indifference on us as agents. Riley's proposal that I overcome a genuine hurt by realizing that an insult's effect is not directly related to the speaker's intentions, or to any feature of my self, but rather is an impersonal artifact of language, seems to heal only through an evacuation of meaning and identity. The word's power evaporates because there is nothing for it to attach to anymore. My second concern is the converse of the first: at the same time that I depersonalize my own experience, I depersonalize the actions and intentions of those who have affected me. Much of the power of speech gets displaced here onto language as an independent phenomenon, and there is no obvious target or goal of political action. Perhaps indifference can ease our pain, but I don't see how it can make us more effective actors.

Whereas Riley's use of “affect” refers to our direct experience of emotions, the contributors to Hahn Chaihark and Daniel A. Bell's edited volume use “affective relations” to refer to the various personal, private-sphere relationships that characterize Confucian political systems and at least potentially interfere with the impersonal, public-sphere ties that are essential to the rule of law and the impartial administration of liberal democracy. (The five primary relationships of Confucian political thought are

husband-wife, father-son, older brother–younger brother, ruler-subject, and friend-friend.) The goal of the book is to explore what role these affective relations play in Confucian-influenced political systems, and to ask how different those systems are from the broadly liberal systems of North America and Western Europe. While Riley encourages us to appreciate the often-hidden role of emotion in our language and politics, the contributors to *The Politics of Affective Relations* encourage us to consider how the varying roles of affect may differentiate political cultures.

The thirteen generally excellent essays group around three themes: rule of law, civil society, and the family. Shaomin Li's essay lays out a rigorous and persuasive argument that the reliance on personal relationships that is typical of East Asian business culture is rooted less in Confucianism than in the economics of developing economies. When markets are small and local, it is efficient for businesses to rely on personal relationships with potential customers or partners. But as markets expand in size and scope, Li argues, it becomes cheaper to base business decisions on publicly available information, such as that provided by credit-reporting agencies, annual reports, and stock performance. However, this shift depends on that publicly available information being accurate, and thus subject to reliable regulation and oversight through a robust legal system. Thus, Li suggests that the preference in East Asian economies, and East Asian cultures more generally, for relying on affective relations may wane as markets grow and expand.

Many of the essays address questions about civil society, ranging from the appropriateness of the concept when applied to Asian societies, to the history of civil society within Confucian political thought, to the recent experience of civil society in China. Fred Dallmayr's provocative essay suggests that Confucian-influenced political cultures may not be able to fully develop civil society without accepting a sixth basic social relationship: "that between citizen and citizen in a shared public sphere and under a common rule of law" (p. 54). Such a change might help to counterbalance the hierarchy embedded in the traditional five relationships, while according to the citizen-citizen relationship the same sense of constitutive necessity the others enjoy.

The politics of gender and family are addressed in essays by David B. Wong and Sin Yee Chan. Chan's nuanced essay addresses the relationship between Western liberal feminism and Confucianism, building on the insight that both appear to see politics and the family as parts of a single continuum. To summarize the point too simply, Confucians believe that the principles at work in the family (filial obedience, respect for age and rank) also apply to the political sphere, while liberal feminists believe that the principles at work in political life (equal rights, the pursuit of justice) also apply in the family. Despite this apparent similarity, Chan argues, feminists and Confucians have deeply different politics because they have deeply different understandings of what the family is. For Confucians, the family and politics operate on the same principles and are for that reason deeply connected, even continuous. One hopes for the same kinds of success within the family and outside of it, and one seeks that success by following the same principles. In contrast, Chan argues, liberal feminists see the family as a special place, sheltered from the dangers and demands of the public sphere, where each individual can be nurtured and given an atmosphere of equality and cooperation. In other words, while both see affinities between family and politics, Confucians genuinely see the two as forming a continuum, while liberal feminists seek to import some of the values of the political sphere into what would nonetheless remain a distinct private one.

My suspicion is that both of these challenging and insightful books will appeal primarily to specialists. In both cases, that would be a pity. Riley's book, despite my reservations about its political usefulness, artfully reveals the hidden affect in many mundane language games. The Hahm and Bell volume is an excellent introduction to the range of debate about Confucian-influenced political systems, and would be a good place for theorists interested in secondary literature on Confucianism to start.