

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

**Edited by Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano, and Daniela Coli:
Politics and the Passions, 1500-1850**

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2006, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links Class Use and other Permissions. For more information, send email to: permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

Introduction

Victoria Kahn and Neil Saccamano

IN RECENT YEARS there has been a renaissance of interest in the passions in interdisciplinary work in the humanities and social sciences. Scholars have directed their attention to the passions as vehicles of knowledge, as attributes of aesthetic experience, as labile affects or shifting currents that contribute to political upheaval or religious self-sacrifice. The reasons for this affective reorientation are multiple. We might think of it as a reaction to the linguistic turn or the deconstruction of the subject. We might instead think of it as the logical consequence of the focus on tropes and figures: themselves, as ancient rhetoricians tells us, the best means of representing the swerve of affect away from pure cognition, as well as the best means of stirring up the passions of the audience. We might think of the recourse to the passions as a consequence of the interest in the body and the body politic across a variety of disciplines. But there are also less academic reasons for the renewed interest in the passions. At a time when a rhetoric of “terror” is a central feature of our common political life, when political ideologies on the right and left vie to characterize themselves as “compassionate,” and when religious passions lead to shocking acts of violence, it is worth reexamining the history of Western reflection on politics and the passions.

This volume begins with the early modern period and concludes with Bentham. It focuses in particular on the new theories of human motivation, the new calculus of passion and interest, that emerged as a result of the social, political, and religious changes that facilitated the transition from feudalism to capitalism. It is arguable, of course, that the passions have always played an important role in Western reflection on politics. Beginning with Plato and Aristotle, philosophers, political theorists, and literary critics have devoted considerable attention to the role of the passions in shaping human knowledge and experience, both individual and collective. At the same time, however, scholars as diverse as Norbert Elias, Albert Hirschman, and Max Horkheimer have argued that the early modern period signals a shift in the conceptualization of the passions, specifically in relation to the political sphere. This volume proceeds from this argument. In the following pages, we briefly set out a framework for

thinking about this conceptual shift that may provide a context for the essays that follow.

Elias famously argued that the centralization of political power at court produced a distinctive “court society” that required the sublimation of the passions and the cultivation of manners as the mark of the political elite. As the early modern state developed a monopoly of physical force, so the individual was no longer compelled—or allowed—to gain prestige on the battlefield. Instead, he began to be shaped by indirect forms of coercion, such as the norms of courtly society and increasing rationalization of economic life. At the same time, coercion was internalized: the nobility’s increasing dependence on the king or prince was accompanied by a “transformation of human consciousness and libidinal make-up,” according to which the individual constrained and controlled himself. For Elias, then, the modern Western notion of the civilized individual cannot be understood “without tracing the process of state-formation” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹

Whereas Elias linked the sublimation of the passions to the civilizing process and “the sociogenesis of absolutism,” Max Horkheimer traced the revived interest in the passions to the skeptical and materialist strains of early modern philosophy and to bourgeois ideology. Skepticism about the persuasiveness of older normative discourses was accompanied by a new, naturalistic anthropology, involving the “historical, political, and psychological analysis” of the emotions.² For Horkheimer, early modern scientific and philosophical discourses of the passions, especially those of Hobbes and Spinoza, establish a simple naturalism premised on the normative judgment that “for everything in nature, and thus for the body and its indwelling soul, to perish represents the greatest evil.”³ This ostensibly scientific concept of nature is, however, the ideological kernel of seventeenth-century discourses on the passions because the claim that the “self-preservation of each thing is its law and standard corresponds to the social condition of the bourgeois individual.” On one hand, the elevation of life itself to the highest good acknowledges the value of material embodiment and the concomitant passions. On the other hand, the recognition accorded material life in these discourses remains nondialectical and ideological in Horkheimer’s account because the passion of self-preservation is presented as the motion of an autonomous subject, not one who is conditioned by social and economic factors.

In his influential work on the passions and interests, Albert Hirschman also traced a historical shift in attitudes toward the passions to specifically political concerns. Like Horkheimer, Hirschman considered seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophical anthropology and ethics as developing in relation to political imperatives, but he differed about the ideological character of those imperatives, especially concerning the early

modern critique of glory. The aristocratic passion for military glory, which was the traditional object and reward for action in the political realm, came under attack from early modern writers as contributing to civil and religious wars and thus as an unacceptable challenge to state power. The new theory of human nature required by a science of politics was characterized by a dynamics of countervailing passions. Against the heroic violence of glory, early modern writers opposed the “dependable” passion of acquisitiveness or greed. Against the desire for self-aggrandizement, they opposed the desire for self-preservation or fear of violent death. This reduction of human nature to its basest passions or interests, and of society to self-interested individuals who bind themselves through contracts, then set the stage for reconstituting the state from the ground up. It also gave rise to a new understanding of the relationship between the public and private spheres, and a new, positive evaluation of everyday life. Yet historically, Hirschman argued, this “denunciation of the heroic ideal was nowhere associated with the advocacy of a new bourgeois ethos.”⁴ The critique of glory marshaled a scientific, positive approach to politics that initially served to counsel princes in the practice of governing and that only later addressed the conduct of individual subjects, extending scientific discourse from “the nature of the state to human nature” (13).

Both in its emphasis on mere life and its representation of government as artificial (contractual or conventional), early modern political theory represented a radical departure from classical antiquity. In the political culture of ancient Greece, the life concerned only with preservation and reproduction—with the body—was traditionally the life of women and slaves who were excluded from political participation and relegated to the management of the patriarchal household, consigned to purely economic labor and devoted to bare life alone. The inglorious life was private in the sense of privative, enslaved to the necessity of reproducing life itself as the mere condition of political freedom. The equality of free men in a political sense presupposed the inequality of those in the household who were concerned with economics. For a citizen of the polis, to live the “good life” meant to be free from the demands of mere life, and to be worthy of glory meant to master mere life and be willing to risk death for the polis. By contrast, early modern political theory appeals to the inglorious passions of the private individual in an effort to establish a “civil society” in which, as Hannah Arendt put it, “the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public.”⁵ For modernity, society is that for which the inglorious life of the ancient Greek household—economics—becomes a matter of public concern. And the reason of the state, in this modern conception, is the protection and preservation of the life of its citizens—a general

collective management of economic transactions whose political form is the nation (28). In the classical conception of politics, the category of “political economy” would have been idiotic or senseless because it is a contradiction in terms until the modern period.

In time, the theory of countervailing passions provided the motor not only for a new validation of self-interest and a sanction for economic activity in civil society, but also for the emergence of a new culture of sentiment. Eighteenth-century moral and political philosophers were concerned to manage the conflictive potential of the passions without necessarily advocating the absolutism of state power. The managing of the passion of self-preservation was sought not through the repression of passion by the authority of reason or by the sovereignty of public regulation but through the “discovery” of other, socially beneficent and constitutive feelings such as benevolence, sympathy, and pity. If, in a Hobbesian account, the demystification of heroic virtues as forms of self-love and self-interest required the intervention of an absolute sovereign to provide security, subsequent writers have recourse to moral sentiments precisely to obviate or defer the exercise of state power by aligning the passions and desires of subjects with the imperatives of law. Lord Shaftesbury, for instance, appeals to a moral-aesthetic sense in human nature that gives rise to social affections and allows virtue to be reconciled with what he calls self-enjoyment and true interest. Similarly, Rousseau claims that the natural passion of pity originally takes the place of law in moving subjects to act in ways consistent with morality on the basis of a common, prerational sentiment of humanity. In these and other eighteenth-century writers, the passions hold out the promise of an immanent ethical community insofar as “humanity” becomes a natural sentiment that orients the desire and actions of subjects toward a common good.

Despite their countervailing of the interested passions, the discourses of moral sentiment partly share the skeptical perspective of early modern accounts of the passions to the extent that these discourses continue to derive their ethics and politics from the experiential matrix of individual subjects, especially the fundamental sensations of pleasure and pain. In this respect, moral and political discourses on the passions in the eighteenth century entertain an essential relation to “aesthetics.” As a philosophical and critical discourse on art, aesthetics emerges in the eighteenth century in an effort to make sense of sense, to order sensations as judgments, by differentiating the kinds of pleasures and pains elicited by particular works of nature and imagination. Signifying more broadly the material realm of sensation and perception, however, aesthetics was already integral to moral, political, and even epistemological discourses of the eighteenth century. The figurative meaning of taste, as aesthetic judgment, is complexly tied to the literal meaning of taste, as a corporeal sense pre-

sumed to have a certain regularity and predictability. Along with the sciences of morality and politics, the logic of art requires that there be a logic of the body and a common sense. As the discourse particularly concerned with the sensations of pleasure and pain that accompany perceptual and imaginative acts and elicit passions and interests, aesthetics does not merely stand alongside morality and politics as another human science in the eighteenth century: it provides for a universal subject of sentiment to support the discourses of moral and political law. From the early modern period to Kant, aesthetic experience is increasingly scrutinized as to whether the particular sentiments of individuals might accord with social virtues and universal humanity. Kant may insist on the autonomy of the aesthetic subject, for whom common sense is only a promise, in contrast to Hume, who makes the social virtue of sympathy essential to aesthetic pleasure. Yet the aesthetic remains crucial to these and other eighteenth-century writers as it is the realm of the pleasures and passions that need to be reflected, represented, refined, educated, or purified in order to make possible ethical and political community.

These accounts of the sentimental, affective, or passionate subject for whom empirical experience or the body is of utmost value signal a historical shift in the political operation of power that Michel Foucault had termed a movement from state violence toward bio-power. In Foucault's well-known formulation of this transformation, state power over subjects is characterized not only by the decision "to make die or let live," exemplified by Hobbes's Leviathan, but by the imperative "to make live or abandon [*rejeter*] to death."⁶ Death is the effect of the withdrawal, not just the exercise, of sovereign power. The new, positive evaluation of everyday life as independent of the state makes, in turn, the psychological and physiological conditions of individual subjects of utmost political import. The private life of the subject becomes a care of the state. In this respect, the analysis of the passions forms part of the broader question of the politics of subjectivity examined by recent scholarly and theoretical work.

Some of the essays that follow address, implicitly or explicitly, the crisis of traditional moral and philosophical discourse in the early modern period and the necessity of inventing a new way of describing the relation of private to public selves, subjective reflection, and action in the realm of politics. In the place of traditional notions of virtue and the traditional superiority of reason to the passions, writers such as Machiavelli, Montaigne, Bacon, Hobbes, and Vico begin to reconceive the passions as substitutes for virtue's spur to political action. In contexts of internecine conflict, of civil and religious war, a clear-sighted recognition of the role of the passions in motivating human behavior can itself be a first step in developing a new political rationality, whether the author's purpose is ultimately to control the aristocratic desire to dominate the people

(McCormick), to articulate a space of political agency indebted neither to classical notions of virtue nor to modern reason of state (Hampton), to reinvent philosophy as natural philosophy (Guillory), to bring about a revolution in political theory predicated on a physics of motion and desire (Coli), or to recast the history of the transition from barbarism to civilization (Caporali).

Many of the essays in this volume also address the disciplinary regulation of the body or the ideological constitution of identity from the seventeenth century onwards. Our contributors approach this issue in various ways. The changing discourses on the passions over the course of this historical period indicate, for some, the reach of class politics into affective life. The contestation of aristocratic and absolutist ideology by a bourgeois and liberal ideology can be read in the reevaluation of gratitude or generosity as moral but nominally apolitical passions at the heart of friendship and familial intimacy (Coleman). The ideological imperatives impinging on various accounts of the passions from Descartes to Bentham prompt efforts to displace the corporeal and material conditions of experience in order to give primacy to a self-affecting subject—by blurring the difference between sentiments and ideas, feelings of pleasure or pain and their representations (Armstrong and Tennenhouse); by differentiating between passions, which have some reference to sensation, and internal feelings or reflections, which preserve but supersede the material character of passionate subjectivity (Kahn); and by pathologizing the passions as implicated in the masochism of a voluntary servitude and by distinguishing them from affects that remain linked to sensibility but do not threaten freedom and moral self-legislation (Caygill), to cite only a few examples. Other contributors to this volume acknowledge the ideological and disciplinary role the passions have historically played but also explore whether a discourse of the passions might provide a critical perspective on the politics of subjectivity—whether, for instance, the concept of life might be rethought apart from its role in liberal political theory (Butler); aesthetic experience might expose or incite acts of disidentification rather than consolidate the autonomous subject of bourgeois civil society (Saccamano); and recent attacks on liberalism’s exclusion of religious passions and beliefs might be answered by recognizing the progressive potential in liberalism’s collective, historical, and contingent understanding of affects in relation to social action and law (Ferguson). Whatever their specific approach to the question of ideology, however, all the essays in this volume reconsider the legacy of the passions in modern political theory and recognize the importance of the history of reflection on “politics and the passions” for modern political debates.