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Book review: Bodies, Affects, Politics: The Clash of Bodily Regimes

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cultural geographies

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Bodies, Affects, Politics: The Clash of Bodily Regimes. By Steve Pile. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley. xii + 206 pp. £22.99 paperback. ISBN 978-1-118-90194-6.

With the proliferation of affect-based research frameworks and methods as well as empirical work mobilising these, it is no longer possible to describe affect as peripheral or 'alternative' in social and cultural geography. As a concept, affect has never been more present, yet the singularity of 'affect' as a word masks a diversity of intellectual lineages that inform affective geographies. While Lacanian geography is alive and well across the Atlantic, here in the UK, geographical studies of affect are all but synonymous with non-representational geographies. Spanning decades, Steve Pile's work has provided a welcome and healthy counterweight to theories of affect that follow the dominant Spinozan pedigree.

Bodies, Affect, Politics collects previously published essays alongside new writing to flesh out this project of constructing a psychoanalytic affective geography. This is a psychological account of the affective politics that create social worlds. Pile marries close (and disabusing) readings of Freud with Rancière's theorization of politics to argue for a subjective ontology of the political. The focus of this ontology Pile terms 'bodily regimes,' which expand Rancière's 'distributions of the sensible'ⁱ by interrogating the production and circulation of 'the sensible.' Following Rancière's depiction of politics as the clash of these distributions of the sensible, Pile argues for understanding politics as the clash of bodily regimes. These regimes structure politics and social life more broadly not just through the machinations of meaning and discourse but through psychological processes. The recognition of social geographies as operating in the terrain of the *psychological* is important because it reinstates the unconscious as a realm of sociality and the political (the unconscious, of course, being accessible only obliquely).

What results from this work is a very different formulation of how bodies come to matter than is presented in theories of embodiment produced in both the cultural turn and non-representational geographies. The body is not simply a surface to be inscribed, nor is it made identifiable and comprehensible through identities and meanings, nor is it irretrievably distributed over its constituent parts and desiring relations through the autonomy of affect. Instead, the body is both the locus of psychological processes (sense) and is composed as an apparent whole by psychological regimes that are greater than any one individual – regimes that produce, for instance, racializations of and from skin (Chapters 2-3). Politics is inherent; bodily regimes are always bumping up against one another, even within the same body. These clashes put bodies at the forefront for battles of the sensible, from which change occurs in the flux of competing regimes.

Pile draws on a range of empirical sources to produce and evidence his theory of bodily regimes, from the political organising that sprang up in the wake of the Grenfell tragedy to case studies of Freud's patients, and from the writings of Fanon to the artwork of Sharon Kivland. This mosaic of empirics does fall into a familiar pattern in the social sciences in which universalizable theory is produced from within a strongly Western context. Still, these themes support the expansion of Pile's theory of bodies, affects and politics to include the surfaces of skin and the vulnerability of its exposure, psychological dysfunction and projection alongside conventional politics and the aesthetics of life. A somewhat eccentric discussion of telepathy brings the work back to broader questions of affect in geography (Chapter 6, especially pp.117-119). Despite the frequent opposition of psychoanalytic and non-representational geographies, many productive parallels emerge here, particularly with the growing literature on affective atmospheres, and Pile's observation that 'the mechanisms that enable senses to be held in common are, in general, taken for granted' (p.114) can

be extended well beyond his critique of Rancière specifically to accounts of the social more broadly. If discourse is dead, *Bodies, Affects, Politics* represents an important contribution to what comes next: a social geography that refuses to take the emergence of collective sense for granted.

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¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London, Bloomsbury, 2004), pp.7–14.