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Defining "Emotional Culture"

What are we talking about when we say "emotional culture"?

It is a way of referring to the peculiar emotional regime of late-modernity, in contrast with that of early modernity. Specifically, it denotes a culture or way of life which, from a structural point of view, favors the immediate satisfaction of desires and, at the same time, places great value on the expression of emotions and adequate emotional management.

What are the signs of that "emotional culture"?

Changes in the emotional regime can be especially viewed in changes in the way of thinking about the borders between the public, the private, and the intimate. A sphere in which this is particularly apparent is media-culture; we can think of the emotional expressions typical of talk-shows, reality-shows, but also in what is revealed, intentionally and unintentionally, in everyday news.

So, emotional culture is something restricted to the so-called "mass culture"?

No: emotional culture can be also recognized in other spheres of life: in the way of approaching consumer behavior, leisure, the way of approaching health and disease, education, etc. Nevertheless, it is true that all the images, behaviors and ideals that we get from the media have an influence on the way we think of our own lives. We could say that the media increase the reach of the emotional culture. For this we just need to think of the way they multiply the emotional effects of a sporting event or the way they foster consumption or the social alarm they contribute to generating in the face of issues related to health and disease. In this way they increase the emotional climate of our daily interactions or even change the very way in which we think of those relations (we just need to think of the changes undergone by trust in the midst of the therapeutical relationship, for instance).

Couldn't that simply be because of the fact that all those spheres are emotional spheres by their very nature?

It is not simply the ordinary presence of emotions in human life as it is the extraordinary prevalence of certain emotions -either authentic or "marketed" emotions- in our social life that leads us to talk about "emotional culture." In general, we have gone from an emotionally reserved to an emotionally expressive culture, in which emotions and their adequate management are positively evaluated. We are not referring simply to the boom of emotional intelligence some years ago; neither do we refer to the contemporary relevance of emotional management in families or corporations. We refer most broadly to the way in which many publicity campaigns are designed— be it for commercials, institutional publicity, or political races. We buy and sell emotional experiences, sympathy, feeling, etc. and all this alters social relationships.



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Is this the reason why Sociology has become interested in emotions?

Yes, it is. Emotions play a crucial role in the process of socialization, and so they become a privileged place of social analysis. Emotions— such as shame, anguish, anxiety, fear, resentment, envy, compassion, sadness, hope, indignation— do not simply say something about the person who suffers them, but also about the context in which he or she lives. Analyzing those emotions in their context is like shedding a ray of light on fragments of social life.

Given that contemporary social life is very complex, fragmented and individualized, grand theories cannot explain much. Thus emotional analysis does not only allow us to know something about the fabric of our daily life, but also to relate it to more general forces influencing institutional changes and the paradoxes they generate.

Why study emotional culture through the analysis of narratives?

Because in order to study emotions first we have to identify them, and there is no other way to do it than seeing how we speak about them.

Experimental science also studies emotions...

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Does this mean that the scientific study of emotions depends on culture?

To a great extent, it does, insofar as, in order to identify and define its object, a particular emotion, it presupposes the human experience of that emotion, and this experience is shaped by cultural practices.

Does this apply to sociological studies on emotions?

Of course. To give an example: were we to conduct a sociological research on the manifestations of romantic love today, we would have first to clarify what we mean by “love”, because, for sure, what today is meant by “love” is very different from what, say, what Jane Austen had in mind. For this reason, a research on the way people and the media speak about love, could shed light on the proper way of conduct that research.