

EDITORIAL



The emotional turn and the aesthetic challenges of sociological inquiry: Writing emotions in a time of upheaval

Sociologists began to reckon seriously with emotions in the later part of the 1970s. Theoretical propositions such as emotional labour and feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979, 1983) illuminated how our feelings emerge and make meaning in a social context (Bericat, 2016). Asserting that ‘what we feel is fully as important to the outcome of social affairs as what we think or do’ (Hochschild, 1990, p. 117), sociologists of emotion further showed how emotions are constitutive forces in social life. They underpin and reveal power dynamics, animate collective action, and frame its reception. Emotions thus matter sociologically in two fundamental ways: all emotions have a social character, and all social reality has an emotional dimension.

Yet the study of emotions presents a paradox that lies at the heart of their ontology. On the one hand, emotions are irreducibly social constructions, moulded by norms, values, and historical contingencies. On the other hand, they possess a phenomenological immediacy—a sensory, embodied dimension that resists full capture through conventional analytical tools and within sociological theorizing.

This duality is a defining feature of emotions themselves. As Jean-Louis Genard (1951–2022) argued in his final writings, emotions are ‘bicephalous’: simultaneously cognitive and affective, collective yet singular. The tension between the ‘gnostic’ and ‘pathic’ dimensions of emotions, as defined by Genard, means that sociologists should neither reduce emotions to products of socialisation nor treat them as mere biological impulses. Instead, they should attend to the ‘generative path of emotions’: the different ways they come into play in coordinating with oneself, the environment, and others (Genard, 2020).

The emotional turn thus finds its necessary counterpart in what might be termed *an aesthetic turn*, one that acknowledges the social agent as a sensing, responsive subject. Emotions exceed the logic of social reproduction, opening onto realms of reciprocal sensitivity, environmental attunement, and irreducible singularity. Emotions, in this sense, are not merely about something; they do something. They move bodies, bind subjects to one another, and configure the

very possibilities of social interaction. To take emotions seriously, then, is to engage with this ‘intensive’ dimension of emotions—their capacity to disrupt and reconfigure experience.

This bicephalous nature of emotions, according to Genard, points to a continuum spanning hermeneutic intelligibility and phenomenological immediacy. Such a continuum suggests that separating Habermasian models of deliberative rationality from the aesthetic dimensions of collective life is analytically risky. Public deliberation is always already permeated by emotional dynamics (hope, anger, nostalgia), which structure adherence to causes or ideologies.

Yet emotions do not merely circulate within institutional or deliberative spaces; they also thrive in what Lauren Berlant terms ‘intimate publics’—affective communities forged through shared narratives, media, and the promise of emotional fulfilment (Berlant, 2008). Berlant’s concept illuminates how emotions bind individuals into collective identities that transcend traditional public/private divides. Her work sheds light on the sociological enigma of ‘collective emotions’ (Kaufmann & Quéré, 2020). More than rare occurrences during moments of ‘effervescence’, they exist in the myriad of ways of sharing emotions at a distance, amplified by the pervasiveness of social networks.

Studying emotions sociologically is never merely an abstract theoretical endeavour. It is inevitably an embodied practice, one that demands heightened reflexivity from the researcher. Fieldwork often entails sharing in the emotions of those under study, being overwhelmed by them, or confronting their absence in ways that disrupt the illusion of detached observation.

Such reflexivity is constitutive of the sociological project itself. As Genard and Roca i Escoda (2019) note, the aesthetic dimensions of inquiry—those moments when the researcher cannot remain indifferent to the subject at hand—are intrinsic to the epistemological and ethical foundations of the discipline. This is particularly evident in the study of social movements, where the researcher’s affective engagements—whether sympathetic or antipathetic—shape the very contours of analysis. The same holds true for the sociology of violence, where the dual risks of sensationalism and euphemism loom large.

Yet emotions are not merely pitfalls to be navigated; they are also resources for understanding. The researcher’s own affective responses can reveal the unspoken mechanisms through which certain subjects, themes, or problems are rendered invisible. Recognizing the affective dimension of inquiry also demands ethical vigilance: we must attend to how we represent emotions without transforming vulnerability into spectacle or reproducing the hierarchies of feeling that determine whose emotions are deemed sociologically significant. To acknowledge the ‘pathic’ dimension of sociological inquiry is not to abandon rigour but to expand its scope, recognizing that the tension between first-person experience and

third-person analysis can be productively inhabited. Sociological writing is part of this process: how we narrate emotions—whether in journal articles, essays, or public interventions—shapes the intimate publics we seek to understand. This requires sustained ethical reflection on how to write about the affective complexity of lived experience without aestheticizing suffering and on how to avoid flattening the political dimensions of emotional life into mere literary effect. We believe that stylistic choices influence meaning and that reflections on sociological writing are important from a public sociology perspective (on a similar note, see Felski, 2022).

Sociologists' engagement with emotions offers more than analytical insight; it provides a critical tool for navigating the affective landscapes of our time. By taking the 'bicephalous' nature of emotions seriously—their capacity to both reflect and reshape social realities—we equip ourselves to confront the challenges of a world where the boundaries between the intimate and the geopolitical, the human and the technological, are increasingly blurred. The emotional turn is thus not merely a scholarly paradigm but a call to attend to the affective undercurrents that animate—and often destabilize—our collective existence.

The contributions gathered in this issue all deal with the bicephalous nature of emotions. They all ask, from their respective perspectives, how it *feels* to live together, to share this world in these times, and how these emotions can be usurped for political purposes.

In 'Affective abundance in the urban everyday: Unpacking the emotive dynamics of coexistence in diverse neighbourhoods', Johanna Hokka and Eeva Puumala introduce the concept of 'affective abundance' to understand the experiences of living together in socioeconomically diverse neighbourhoods. Drawing on interviews conducted in Finland and Sweden, they take a temporal orientation to 'the emotive plenitude of life in the city' and discover three temporal constellations of affect: *persistence*, *succession*, and *routine*. Through these, Hokka and Puumala show the analytical value of their concept in expanding the range of emotions considered in analyses of coexistence.

Ona Schyvens, Gert Verschraegen, and Stijn Oosterlynck explore the significance of emotions in voting decisions. In 'Demographic fears, status uncertainty, and the urban–rural divide: Symbolic boundary-making of radical-right voters in small and medium-sized towns', they analyze voter interviews from the Dender region in Belgium through the lens of symbolic boundary theory. Schyvens and colleagues show how radical-right voters draw three key symbolic boundaries—the urban–rural, the religious, and the cultural–linguistic—thus positioning their own community as the threatened majority. The authors show how this 'demographic fear' of becoming 'replaced by outsiders' feeds off

metaphors and narratives cultivated by radical-right parties, urging researchers to take ‘politically cultivated fears’ seriously.

Johana Chylíková continues the analyses of how populist discourses are reflected in the boundary-making of lower-middle class citizens. In ‘Together in the ordinary world: The alignment between populist discourse and lower-middle-class discourse on class and socioeconomic hierarchy’, Chylíková takes us to the Czech Republic to show the political significance of animosity, resentment, and dignity. Chylíková finds a strong alignment between populist discourses and her interviewees’ self-description as a rather homogenous, ‘honest, hardworking, ordinary people’ and a similarly painted animosity towards ‘the unadaptables’—that is, the undeserving poor. However, contrary to the antagonism towards ‘the elite’ evoked in the populist discourse, Chylíková’s interviewees expressed enthusiasm and admiration towards ‘the normal rich’.

Finally, Enzo Colombo, Paola Rebughini, and Ipek Demirsu trace the political emotions of Italian youth in ‘Navigating political emotions and agency among Italian youth in the post-pandemic urban landscape’. Through interviews with 66 under-30s in the Milan metropolitan area, the authors identify a feeling of exceptionalism among the young people that leads them to engage with political actions in which they feel personally invested but also to a sense of impotence amidst the insurmountable, overlapping crises. The authors also discover the youth’s emotional investment in social causes like inclusivity and compassion for the plight of others, alongside a distance from militancy.

The book review in this issue addresses the emotional entanglements that shape human interaction with robots and other technologies. Ilaria Fornacciari reflects on *How that robot made me feel* (2025), a multidisciplinary collection of essays edited by Ericka Johnson. The volume brings together a range of perspectives in theoretical and creative work examining the interplay between emotions and technologies. Some of the chapters are more insightful than others; in places, the book ‘tends to promote a simplistic, bipartisan approach’. Still, Fornacciari finds use in some of the volume’s chapters that offer meaningful critique on the hidden normativity and emotional/reproductive labour, which undergird our relationships with AI and social robotics.

References

- Bericat, E. (2016). The sociology of emotions: Four decades of progress. *Current Sociology* 64(3), 491–513. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392115588355>
- Berlant, L. (2008). *The female complaint: The unfinished business of sentimentality in American culture*. Duke University Press.
- Felski, R. (2022). Sociological writing as resonant writing. *The Sociological Review*, 70(4), 656–665. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261221106521>

- Genard, J.-L. (2020). Une sociologie des émotions 'modo aesthetico'? In L. Kaufmann & L. Quéré (Eds.), *Les émotions collectives : En quête d'un « objet » impossible* (pp. 169–203). Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsehess.29454>
- Genard, J.-L., & Roca i Escoda, M. (2019). *Éthique de la recherche en sociologie*. De Boeck Supérieur.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85(3), 551–575. <https://doi.org/10.1086/227049>
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: The commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.
- Hochschild, A. R. (1990). Ideology and emotion management: A perspective and path for future research. In T. D. Kemper (Ed.), *Research agendas in the sociology of emotions* (pp. 117–142). State University of New York Press.
- Johnson, E. (Ed.) (2025). *How that robot made me feel*, MIT Press.
- Kaufmann, L., & Quéré, L. (Eds.) (2020). *Les émotions collectives : En quête d'un « objet » impossible*. Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsehess.29399>

Laura Centemeri

Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique

France

laura.centemeri@ehess.fr

Taina Meriluoto

University of Helsinki

Finland

taina.meriluoto@helsinki.fi

Carla Malafaia

University of Porto

Portugal

carlamalafaia@fpce.up.pt

Lydia Ayame Hiraide

Soka University

Japan

Lydia.hiraide@soka.ac.jp

Linda Haapajarvi

Centre Maurice Halbwachs

France

linda.haapajarvi@ehess.fr