

Affective Economy: A Theoretical Outline

Subjects: **Behavioral Sciences**

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The affective economy is a concept that emerged within the field of social sciences, focusing on the interplay between emotions, affects, and economic processes. It explores how emotions and affective experiences shape economic practices, consumption patterns, and the production of goods and services. In the affective economy framework, emotions are seen as not merely individual but deeply embedded in social and political contexts, shaping and being shaped by social structures and power dynamics. The affective economy emphasizes how emotions circulate and contribute to the construction and maintenance of social orders, impacting economic actions. It acknowledges the profound impact of emotions and affects on economic behavior. Thus, this concept sheds light on the intricate relationship between emotions and economic processes, demonstrating how affective experiences influence consumption, production, labor, financial decisions, and the overall dynamics of the market economy. It emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of human behavior in economic contexts, recognizing the significance of emotions and affective responses as integral components of economic activities. This concept is connected to notions of dwelling, topophilia, and affective atmospheres, providing insights into the complexities of economic transactions in diverse cultural contexts.

affects

affective economy

emotions

economic analysis

cultural analysis

The relationship between emotion and social organization has been a topic of interest in anthropology since Durkheim's emphasis on sentiments in the constitution of society ^[1]. Recent decades have seen anthropologists focus on emotion as an independent area of study, exploring questions about the universality of basic emotions and the cross-cultural validity of Western psychological categories ^{[2][3]}. Studies have revealed that emotions are intertwined with culture, language, and social life, challenging the idea of a distinct emotional domain included in the dimension of individual experience ^[4]. They have refined distinctions and explored applications of emotions in various contexts, shedding light on different aspects of social life, including market activity ^[5], political struggle ^[6], and social suffering ^[7], topics which were previously scantily explored ^[8]. In so doing, they addressed questions about the intersection of emotions with social life.

This chapter explores a concept developed in the framework of this debate, the "affective economy", aimed at shedding light on the interactions between individuals, communities, their activities, and their environment. While this term was introduced into the current debate of social sciences through the work of Ahmed ^[9], over the years, it has seen various uses and interpretations, which this entry describes. In particular, through the analysis of this concept, in these pages, I will attempt to provide a comprehensive account of the different ways in which affects enter the social space influencing the actions and the understanding of individuals and communities.

Before beginning this analysis, it will be useful to clarify the semantic perimeter of two key terms that will be widely used in this entry, emotions (and affections) and affects, since their meanings have been widely debated and pose challenges, often being used as synonyms in common speech. In this entry, the words emotions (and affections) and affects have distinct meanings. Here, building on an established understanding of emotions in anthropology, emotions are understood as culturally bounded dimensions of experience that may differ from culture to culture or from community to community ^[10]. Specifically, “emotions are presumed to be a form of social construction [...while affects are] the force that moves bodies of all kinds [...] into and out of states of being. Affect is not ontologically distinct from or secondary to cognition or meaning.” ^[11]. In the following pages, I will specify the meanings assigned to the words, when unclear or overlapping, to offer the most accessible the discussion and easy understanding of the cultural process at stake.

This entry opens by introducing the cultural context in which the concept of affective economy was introduced, thus delving into its original formulation and foundation to indicate some of the areas of research where it has been used. Thus, it explores some of the limitations this theoretical tool presents, indicating a possible integration of the different interpretations given to affective economy to make it possible for this concept to encompass the entire process through which affects turn into emotions and then into cultural objects that circulate within and transform society. To clarify the theoretical contribution of this concept and its heuristic use, this entry closes with an example of an application to explore the current consumption practices linked with diamonds.

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