THE EMOTIONAL ORGANIZATION
Praise for *The Emotional Organization*

“This fresh, innovative collection of essays offers the reader a wondrous range of voices -- among them an assistant director for hospitality on a cruise ship, an intake worker at a rape crisis center, a call center trainer coaching trainees to ‘sound right,’ and a job center employee managing the frustration of despairing job seekers. All these and more provide take-off points for some of the most exciting forays into basic theory of emotion I’ve seen in a long while. This is a great collection.”

*Arlie Russell Hochschild, author of The Managed Heart and The Commercialization of Intimate Life*

“Finally, a book that brings together emotion, power, and identity: Steve Fineman has gathered a fine group of researchers and some fascinating studies to provide us with invaluable new insights about what it means to work in the emotional organization.”

*Cynthia Hardy, University of Melbourne*

“The study of emotion work has become a fertile area of theory and research concerning work and identity in modern society. This important volume adds significantly to this field by providing new theoretical and empirical insights that will add greatly to this already lively field. It will be essential reading for social scientists with an interest in the nature of the contemporary workplace.”

*Alan Bryman, University of Leicester*
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CHAPTER 1
Introducing the Emotional Organization

Stephen Fineman

This book is about emotion; emotion embedded in the political agendas of organizational life. It advocates a frame-shift in our understanding of emotion – from an ideologically neutral, within-the-individual, experience to one that is firmly shaped by social structures and the norms and values of the organization.

From this angle, emotions such as love, fear, anger, fury, resentment, embarrassment, happiness, joy, envy, and sadness appear as tradable social resources or commodities; something that can be negotiated, manipulated or pushed aside; engineered by cultural patterning or managerial prerogative; subtly steered or perverted in social encounters; bought and sold. Accordingly, they are a vital medium through which to understand the minutiae of interpersonal encounters, as well as broader patterns of voice in the workplace, especially inequality and oppression. They raise questions of power: whose interests are really being served when management targets employee feelings, such as their emotional intelligence, stress, fun, happiness, or well-being? They provide special leverage on the character and dilemmas of our emotional and aesthetic identities as the pace and place of work change, such as from the confines of the urban office to any space that can accommodate a computer and connection to the World Wide Web. Who am I, who are “they,” what do I feel when my work colleagues or customers are mainly phantoms in a global virtual world?

The contributors to this book all share this standpoint; in short, a critical perspective on what emotion is and does. Criticality here is beyond the usual sense of being circumspect in one’s evaluation and judgment. It reflects a particular outlook on emotions in organizations – that they are produced through interpersonal work that is conditioned by cultural imperatives: the social rules that sanction what is appropriate to feel and express.

Emotions, therefore, are remarkable social products that “make” all forms of human communication. However, of particular interest to critical scholars are the social contours or biases that act like invisible hands on emotion – to privilege some forms of expressiveness over others; to silence or oppress some voices but not others. We see this, for instance, in the gendering of emotion – the kinds of feelings that men or...
women “should” express in particular situations – and in the stigma attached to deviants. Emotion, thus, is also a medium of valuation and power where the objects of joy, celebration, revulsion, or distaste are societally prefigured. There are, for example, the prevalent feelings towards minority groups, asylum seekers, city “fat cats,” royalty, or celebrities. The social valuation produces an emotionology – society’s “take” on the way certain emotions are to be directed and expressed. In sum, while emotions have biological roots, they are soon overwritten by social and moral discourses; we are born into a world where emotionologies take a grip on our experiences and behaviors.

**Emotionologies**

Emotionologies are produced and reproduced through all manner of discursive and institutional practices, some more potent and enduring than others. They include the family, television programs, films, schools, the internet, religious authorities, and governments. Each source will vary somewhat in authority and form, but they are linked by the dominant ideologies of their resident culture. So we inherit emotionologies that soon appear natural and typically go unchallenged. They will inform how we should feel, and express our feelings, about ourselves (“happy,” “positive,” “fine”) as well as how to feel about others – such as a love of winners, disgust for muggers, cynicism about politicians, and ambivalence towards teenagers. They shape and underpin the deference patterns of particular social encounters – what to feel or reveal at weddings, funerals, dinner parties, places of worship, or before a judge.

Emotionologies reflect their social times. For instance, early nineteenth century European and American cultures were preoccupied with melancholy. People paraded their nostalgia and sentimentalism; sadness became a “badge of a way of life.” This contrasts with contemporary American cheerfulness – a later modern invention born of tough economic times. Good cheer came to represent “an active personality, capable of solving its own problem . . . by keeping in good spirits at all times.” Expressed in the ubiquitous smile, and deeply embedded in American etiquette, good cheer has become a potent symbol of consumerist well-being, reproduced in all manner of product advertisements and customer services. It has even spawned activist groups devoted to its protection, such as “The Great American Grump Out” – fighting cantankerousness “with fun.” Their website organizes action days where “America is asked to go for 24 hours without being crabby or rude.” Activists are instructed to “wear a smile on a T-shirt, a cap, a button, or on your face.” We may contrast such displays with British reserve: the norm to tolerate, even celebrate, grumpiness, as epitomized in prime-time television programs such as *Grumpy Old Men* and *Grumpy Old Women*. In each, a selection of eloquent, “grumpy” media celebrities sardonically expose the absurdities of a wide range of everyday social practices.

In the workplace, emotionologies are embedded in, and shaped by, different organizational routines, from employee appraisals and interviews to team meetings and negotiations with customers. In such settings, emotionologies underpin – with varying degrees of consistency – what we “do” with our frustration, boredom, anger, envy, sadness, embarrassment, lust, hope, or happiness to make and sustain the routine and
power balance. In these terms, emotionologies are the building blocks of “organization” and its emotion culture, infusing interactions with predictability, order, and meaning. This extends to rivalry and conflict. For instance, deriding an enemy’s political, economic, or religious system, while feeling commitment or pride for one’s own, has long reinforced “the reason” for a conflict. The corporate world has institutionalized such sentiments in its philosophy of marketplace wars and battles, so much so that one management consultant advocates “a battle cry drilled into the skull of every employee, from top to bottom.” In casting competitors as enemies, it follows that they can be derided and “crushed,” and their defeat celebrated. Conversely, losing a battle is to be attended by feelings of humiliation and resentment – and then aggression to fuel a further round in the competitive “war.”

Critical Roots

Through a critical lens, emotionologies are fundamental to the political texturing and social construction of emotion. Yet the intellectual roots of critical thought on organizations are mixed. Some attest to Marxism and related theories of the labor process. Here key organizational structures are seen to be fixed, favoring the owners and managers of capital, dividing power and privilege such that tension, disputation, and resistance are never far from the surface. The emotional order is, therefore, always under strain as individuals and coalitions vie for position or dominance, but against a background where executives and managers control the key resources. When such power differences are abused, oppressive practices are not far behind, such as corruption, harassment, bullying, racism, or homophobia.

Other critical approaches testify to postmodern, or poststructural, variants of social constructionism and discourse theory. Power is said to reside in the way existing narratives of value and feeling are impressed on people, often in unnoticed ways. Some renditions argue that this is all pervasive within a culture or subculture and difficult to resist. For instance, the history of African-American integration into white mainstream culture has been marked by periods when the white construction of their emotionality as “inferior” has acted as a distinct barrier to their entry to particular organizations. And we can see similar patterns as different minority groups, by virtue of their nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, or psychological/physical health, are pathologized and excluded because of their “inappropriate” or “odd” emotions.

The hold of dominant emotionologies, then, can be significant. But the full extent of their influence is debatable. Some critical approaches are less totalizing than others, giving more credence to individual actors as active agents in shaping the repertoires and norms of emotion. Still others, though, suggest, pessimistically, that we have now reached a “postemotional” phase in cultural and economic development, where emotionologies no longer serve deeply rooted social mores or moral concerns. They are ephemeral phenomena, packaged by media and marketing experts, and transmitted in superficial virtual and interpersonal exchanges. In a world of shifting and unstable meanings, our emotions owe more to soap operas, scripted “nice day” encounters, celebrity lifestyles, sound bite advertisements telling us what makes us
“feel right,” and manufactured “fun experiences.” Together they create a hollow shell of emotion, which, beyond a fleeting exchange-value, is void of feeling and moral consequence.\textsuperscript{22} Meštrović\textsuperscript{23} regards this as the “mechanization” of emotion, while Baudrillard\textsuperscript{24} is more forceful in his imagery – he speaks of “cryogenized,” or half-dead, emotions.

While there are differences between critical approaches, they do have a common denominator: they worry away at the surface appearances of emotion to expose the systemic biases that shape our subjectivities – our sense about who we are and what we feel. For example, in recent years, control in many organizations has shifted from being overtly coercive to diffuse. It now aims to engage employees’ energy and commitment through empowerment – flattening organizational hierarchies and pushing responsibility downwards. Significantly, it promises a happier employee. At first blush this appears appealing and liberating. Who would not want to be empowered, especially when it is presented as a way of increasing one’s pleasure at work? Critical researchers, though, are skeptical. They point to the paradox of management using its own power to “empower” others – but usually on management’s terms. Beneath empowerment’s humanistic trappings, one can see a subtle form of control aimed at getting more performance from workers, often for relatively less reward, leading one writer to describe empowerment as a “therapeutic fiction.”\textsuperscript{25} And, indeed, against the success stories of empowerment reported in the popular management literature, there is a growing body of evidence on failures. Far from raising employee happiness, this research reveals increasing levels of cynicism and resistance.\textsuperscript{26–28}

Critical research does a stalwart job in exposing the structural oppressions of organizational life, but it would be wrong to assume that its quest ends there. A critical lens also brings into focus the micro-politics and power-flows of different emotions crucial to workaday feelings and meanings. Elsewhere, I have suggested that these processes are best understood as \textit{emotional arenas},\textsuperscript{29,30} a dramaturgical metaphor that headlines the first section of this book. In such arenas, emotion is “performed” in a particular context for a particular audience (bosses, colleagues, customers, clients, patients, competitors) – people to be influenced or impressed, placated or befriended, repelled or shamed. Emotion, far from being an out-of-control impulse, is acted-out through vocal and bodily postures aligned to the micro-structure of the situation. In this manner, emotion is an important strategic resource. The expression of anger, affection, nostalgia, love, fear, boredom, frustration, embarrassment, remorse, pity, or hope are, then, skillful accomplishments that help sustain, augment, or destabilize micro-social orders.

Each emotional arena will have its political and regulatory peculiarities. Compare, for instance, Disney World with a hospital, a doctor’s surgery with a McDonald’s outlet, or a solicitor’s office with a travel agent. The emotions that define and maintain “proper” professional conduct in these settings vary in their profile of appropriate smiles/compassion/seriousness. Moreover, each arena will comprise zones where different, tacit, emotion rules apply – back stage or front stage, corridor or car park, water cooler or rest room. To an extent, then, our emotional life, like other aspects of life, is always hedged in – but, arguably, not entirely caged. We are also agents of our emotional destinies as we test the boundaries of our arenas. Where there are tensions,
ambiguities, uncertainties, or spaces, we may feel impelled to “do something different” – a burst of anger, a joke, a pained expression, a loud sigh, a broad smile, and so forth.

Such spontaneous interventions are rarely without social precedence or model, but that does not obviate risk; their acceptability within a given social order cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, the playing field for impulsivity or deviation is rarely an even one; some people will have more confidence, power, or status than others to experiment with an emotion order. There are, for instance, the “tempered radicals” – ordinary organizational members who are committed to their organization but also frustrated by its dominant culture (e.g. it deprecates women, it jokes about minorities, it humiliates novices). They are prepared to challenge the guardians of the culture, hoping for small wins. Bigger “wins” are possible (although far from guaranteed) when the experiment is hierarchically driven, from the top. Here, for instance, we have grand designs to change the valuation or tone of emotion in an organization, such as attempts to make it more aggressive, fun, compassionate, or positive. Typically, such corporate emotionologies are set in the executive boardroom and cascaded throughout the organization.

Identity Matters

From what has been said so far, it should be apparent that a critical view of emotion has implications for social identity – the focus of the second part of this book. The traditional, modernist, view is that identity in organizations is a stable phenomenon concerning the social or occupational groups to which we see ourselves belonging (e.g. managers, students, the sick, black, the stressed, women, gays, secretaries, porters, cleaners) contrasted with those to which we do not relate. In postmodern thinking, however, identity is more than a static, self-classificatory, niche. It is a process of holding and resolving different social-emotional narratives about who we are, who we were, and who we wish to be. This implicates, initially, an affective pecking order of jobs: those that society prizes, is ambivalent about, or scorns. We see this, for instance, in the high esteem that Americans currently attribute to those working as firefighters, doctors, nurses, military officers, teachers, or police officers. In comparison, there is a distinct lack of affection – “hardly any prestige” – for real estate brokers, stockbrokers, actors, bankers, and journalists. But such a snapshot disguises the shifting sands that underpin some occupations. Over the past quarter century, US polls tell us, lawyers, scientists, and business executives have suffered progressively less esteem in the public eye while, recently, firefighters, nurses, and teachers have enjoyed a sharp elevation in respect.

We may contemplate some of the possible reasons behind these shifts, such as firefighters’ heroic roles in the aftermath of the attack of September 11, 2001 and the corporate scandals at Enron and WorldCom. They are reminders that occupational esteem is a product of particular cultural, ideological, and market conditions. Importantly, though, such valuations will comprise first-line identity messages that members of an occupation have to confront. They are the backdrop to more localized
emotionologies about, for instance, one’s specific organizational role (appreciated or deprecated), one’s physical appearance (“being attractive”), and reactions to one’s accent, gender, religion, or age. In this context, identity narratives are, as postmodern theorists suggest, in flux, a flux to be addressed through identity work.

As a concept, identity work draws attention to the feelings and meanings that are ongoing as actors “work” on their identities – individually and socially. Identity work is invariably emotional, implicating pride, pleasure, fear, anxiety, or despair. Identity work is likely to be particularly burdensome when imputed attributes are received as disruptive, discordant, or, in the extreme, denigrating. Some features of identity, especially those emanating from wider occupational emotionologies, may feel comfortable; others less so. Still others will be fragile and contingent. For instance, in the UK the social worker is often viewed with some suspicion, a perception to be “held” (internalized, defended, rationalized) by the resource-starved incumbent as she faces challenging clients – some of whom do not welcome her intervention. Identity work, especially with colleagues, aims to add some stability of meaning to these various tensions.

In a fragmented, postmodern, landscape, some of the means to achieve stability are, ironically, also provided by postmodernism – in the form of different narratives of self to explore and appropriate. We are offered heroic images of “emotional intelligent,” “solutions oriented,” “flexible,” “reflective,” “unconditional positive regard” practitioners. Other accounts tell of the wounded self, such as from the “traumas” of job loss or downsizing, being a “toxin handler,” or “suffering” discrimination or stress in the workplace. These comprise an identity tool kit for adjusting social-emotional scripts, tightening storylines and plots, and designing alternative self-descriptions for different audiences – including oneself. Identity work derives much of its edge from the history and positioning of relationships between individuals and those who have an apparent stake in their identity. Who, of these stakeholders, has one felt appreciated by, admired, disliked, or feared? Who has to be pleased or appeased? To whom should one not reveal weakness or displeasure? Where is it appropriate to express warmth and appreciation and when should these feelings be disguised? Identity work leads to the conclusion that identity, rather than being a fixed “thing,” is a continuous socio-emotional process of becoming.

The contributors to this book reflect the themes I have outlined. In their different ways, they demonstrate how emotion is produced and reproduced by structural and social conditions and powerful “reality senders.” Within these settings, some organizational actors are trapped and struggling, others are well-conditioned to what “is,” and still others are able to carve significant emotional spaces for themselves.

The Book’s Contents

Part I: Emotional arenas

In part I, nine different emotional arenas are explored. It begins with the ward of a hospital (chapter 2). Sharon Bolton observes the interactional rituals between nurses and patients from the vantage point of a hospital patient – herself. Through her reveal-
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ing, often intimate, ethnography, she reveals the fine texture of the moral order and emotional politics of the ward, and the nurse–patient interaction. She challenges postmodernists who regard emotion as a cynical performance, devoid of “real” passion or compassion.

In chapter 3, Sarah Tracy takes us into the closed and murky world of prisons. Her interest, as a critical ethnographer, is to expose the structural mechanisms of power and control that bear down on front-line prison officers. She describes a complex web of structural tensions, status challenges, and double-binds that rob officers of power to enact some of the most basic functions of their role. Their prevalent burnout, she argues, is deeply rooted in these identity-eroding discourses and processes.

Chapter 4 unpacks what is arguably one of the most emotive work settings – crisis work with rape victims. Patricia Martin, Douglas Schrock, Margaret Leaf, and Carmen Von Rohr show how rape victims are subject to a range of different professional helpers and agents of the state who are themselves captured by the emotion cultures in which they work. This complicates, if not negates, emotional supportiveness for the victim. The roots of the difficulties, according to the authors, lie in the emotionologies of institutions, such as medicine and criminal justice, which define both “rape” and “victim.” They powerfully determine the relative worth of working with rape victims, as well as the degree of respect, concern, or empathy that they deserve.

In chapter 5, Mary Haman and Linda Putnam take a sideways look at the “bright, fun” demeanor of service workers in the USA. They focus on trainers and related staff in a sports and recreation center where good cheer is part of the job description, and emotional labor is de rigueur. They show that, unusually, most of the control and surveillance comes, not from management, but from peers, determined to impose the “right” form of emotional labor on their co-workers. This has the insidious effect of demonizing and marginalizing those colleagues who are seen to be “just acting,” even though their acts might be convincing. It is a subtle, but powerful, emotion order that eventually undermines confidence and impels some to leave.

Chapter 6 concerns jobs centers, a public service in the UK that aims to support the unemployed. Marek Korczynski and Victoria Bishop look closely at the high incidence of violence by customers against staff in these centers and seek explanations, drawing upon a qualitative study of the sector. They pin the blame on the ethic of customer sovereignty – “the customer is always right” – imported from the private sector. Violence, they suggest, is less a breakdown in societal norms, but a consequence of them. Job center staff are drilled to take personal responsibility for causing, containing, or assuaging customer anger and violence, on which they are judged by their managers. Many of them internalize this unquestioningly, akin to the “self-disciplining” described by some postmodern discourse theorists. Abuse becomes normalized, accepted. This, the authors argue, traps them in an ideological cage, which limits the feelings that they are able publicly to express, while also routinely exposing them to customer frustration and abuse, often for reasons beyond workers’ control. They suggest that such violence be de-legitimized by relabeling it “customer bullying.”

Chapter 7, by Kiran Mirchandani, casts a critical eye over the trend among major corporations to outsource their call center operations to countries where labor is
cheap. She reports on an Indian-based call center where indigenous operators regularly have to deal with customer racism and abuse and, akin to job center staff, have to take it all in their stride. They work under close managerial surveillance and scripted interactions, yet the job is presented to them as being professional and exclusively graduate. Mirchandani concludes that globalized work creates special tensions for emotional and aesthetic labor, conditioned by colonial legacies of superiority and deference. This means workers have to acquiesce to the power of a distant client down the line, while also finding ways of preserving their own dignity.

In chapter 8, Nicole Kangas and Debra Meyerson take us into website work. Their field setting is an internet publishing company, I.com, offering entertainment, games, and related news through the web to a young audience. The authors reveal how employees’ politicized and gendered identities influence their experience of their work, their feelings of “flow,” and how time speeds by or drags. In what is close to a natural experiment, they compare two work groups doing very similar work in the same timescale – one comprising women producing a publication for girls, the other consisting of men working on a boys’ publication. Kangas and Meyerson found that the men were engrossed in their work and full of energy. They were feted as corporate heroes, at one with the masculinity, violence, and sex preferences of their audience. In contrast, the women felt disempowered and disaffected. Their progressive beliefs about gender and womanhood were not legitimized by I.com executives or advertisers, leading to much fretting, ambivalence, and angst within the group.

The gendered order of society is also the concern of Gill Musson and Katy Marsh in their chapter on home-based telework (chapter 9). They focus on how men and women deal with culturally gendered narratives of role and feeling when they are disrupted by the very conditions and mechanisms of work – being at home and working virtually. Their case study illuminates the struggles and contradictions of those who go against the cultural stereotype of working parents, and how they marshal the discourses available to them in order to cope.

Chapter 10, the last chapter in this part of the book, delves into the emotional dynamics of management consultancy. Andrew Sturdy, Timothy Clark, Robin Fincham, and Karen Handley expose important emotion subtexts, expressed as humor, in what otherwise seem to be emotionless exchanges between clients and consultants. The humor emerges as a response to the asymmetrical power and status relations of the encounter. They illustrate how humor both obfuscates and attenuates tensions and anxieties, especially in “put downs” from clients feeling threatened, and how jokes – from either party – place the consultant at a safer operational distance.

Part 2: Shifting identities

The second part of the book is a critical examination of the wider trends in the emotionalization of identity, in and around organizations.

Caroline Hatcher (chapter 11) opens the section with a critical discussion of the historical discourses that have defined the identity of the ideal “corporate character,”
and “his” emotional makeup. She argues that the discourse of emotional intelligence marks a watershed, creating the impression that there is now a new and legitimate space for women as “emotionally intelligent” in the upper echelons of organizations. But in deconstructing the rhetoric and key texts on emotional intelligence, alongside related discourses on identity, emotion, aesthetics, and sexuality, Hatcher is led to a very different conclusion: that women are judged as having the wrong sort of emotionality to earn their place as superior performers, which remain the preserve of men. *Plus ça change.*

Chapter 12, by Stephanie Shields and Leah Warner, can read as an excellent companion to Hatcher’s in that they reach a similar conclusion, but in a different way. They explore the political and cultural conditions that have favored the emergence of emotional intelligence, especially the recent valuation of skillfully regulated expressiveness in US public life. From their detailed examination of emotional intelligence, they detect a distinct gender bias, leading to the “disappearing” of women’s emotional competencies. The vanishing act is achieved, in part, by circularity in defining those (men) who are already in positions of power as already possessors of emotional intelligence. People who do not fit the dominant emotionology remain outsiders. Shields and Warner grasp the “change” nettle to discuss different ways that a gender-fair emotional intelligence might be made possible – not least by focusing more on emotion structures than on emotion traits.

In chapter 13, Jeff Hearn brings the emotionalities of identity into a global milieu. The institutions and organizations that shape and define our selves and emotions are, he argues, becoming progressively transnational. He outlines the political, economic, and technological changes that have affected the movement of information, religion, goods, and services and have permeated organizations. They have created a medley, if not confusion, of emotionologies as people shift across, or live between, different national boundaries. These fragment or recast emotion expectations, gender positioning, emotion language, and feeling rules. Hearn illustrates his thesis through scenarios in academia, migration, transnational corporations, the military, and virtual communications.

Chapter 14 is by Philip Hancock and Melissa Tyler. They argue for a blending of the aesthetic and the emotional in our critical understanding of emotions in organizations – concepts that have traditionally traveled separate trajectories in organizational theory. They suggest that aesthetic manipulations of an organization’s physical space and objects – their design, shape, colour, and texture – not only evoke particular “designer” feelings and emotional attachments, but also exert control over those who work in, or are consumers of, that space. Such emotive-aesthetic managing extends to “branded bodies,” where employees are required to possess the body shape, appearance, or dress that “sells”; they must express the “correct” marketing image and its artistry. Those who do not match up, or cannot perform the appropriate aesthetic labor, are stigmatized or excluded. This, the authors suggest, is a manifestation of “staging value” in an “aesthetic economy” where seducing the senses is a mechanism of organizational power and control. It helps align the organization’s political ambitions with the desires of the consumer and, at times, the employee.

In the epilogue, I reflect on the overarching themes of the book and on some of the prospects for critical approaches to emotion.
References

INTRODUCING THE EMOTIONAL ORGANIZATION

PART I

EMOTIONAL ARENAS
CHAPTER 2

THE HOSPITAL

Me, Morphine, and Humanity: Experiencing the Emotional Community on Ward 8

Sharon C. Bolton

This chapter tells a personal story. It is not in the conventional form of academic critique; nevertheless it does offer some relevant and pressing comments on the received orthodoxy around emotion and work. At the heart of the story are my own observations during a nine-day stay in an NHS hospital ward, which prompted a review and refutation of assertions made by a body of thought that describes the current status of society as “postemotional,” social actors and their interactions with each other as simulations, and service workers as simulacrums. The chapter’s aim is to reintroduce the notion of humanity into the analysis of social interaction, to endorse the strength and interconnectedness of social ties, and, particularly, to make a renewed case for the role of agency in the study of emotional communities at work. While the origins and presentation of the chapter may be in part unconventional, academic convention is followed in its contribution, which includes: a brief review of the literature concerning the “death of the social,” an alternative conceptual framework in the shape of Goffman’s work on the interaction order, and a body of empirical data, albeit collected in an irregular way. Finally, I would like to believe that the argument presented in this chapter proffers a passionate conviction that we need not be drowned in the nihilistic premonitions concerning the death of the social.

The Public and the Private Worlds of Emotion

There are competing accounts concerning developments in how emotion might be viewed. Borrowing extensively from Elias, Wouters suggests that the boundary between the public and the private spheres is being redrawn as the result of a general “informalization of feeling”:

There is enough empirical data to show that during approximately the last hundred years the models of emotion exchange have become more varied, more escapable and more open for idiosyncratic nuances, thus less rigid and coercive.
Wouters takes evidence of the breaking down of social barriers in modern society to show how social actors are all now much more familiar with cultures different than their own. They have developed the ability to switch and swap faces according to the demands of many different situations. Nevertheless, the informalization of emotion has not led to a breaking down of the order of social interaction. On the contrary, the wider variances available to social actors in the presentation of self has led to the need for a greater awareness of rituals of deference and demeanor, and, as a result, men and women “have become more strongly integrated into tighter knit networks of interdependencies in which the level of mutually expected self-restraint has risen.”

For others, the focus of their analysis is on the very opposite of “interdependencies.” The pressures of modern life have led to a move toward the routinization of emotion, leading to claims of a postemotional, sentimentalized, Disneyized or, even, “post-ironic” society. This does not mean that society is emotionless but that the emotions presented are manufactured states devoid of human feeling. In other words, it is often claimed that what we are on the outside and the person we present to others has become disconnected from feelings and motivations that were once prompted by a sense of belonging to a “moral order,” which, in turn, relied on reciprocity and mutual obligation to create and sustain social relationships. Instead, emotions are now rooted in a society dominated by consumption where we become attached to new media-created images of artificial humanity.

From this standpoint, it is argued that, in the unreliable, fragmented conditions of consumer capitalism, consumption and production are inextricably linked and the boundaries between the public and private blurred. Hence, people search for a sense of coherence and meaning and, in this context, the world of production offers a stable platform where identities can be confirmed and people can take their rightful place in the world of consumption. Thus, the new source of control is the imperative of the free market and the related culture industry, as both producers and consumers willingly collaborate in their own exploitation and “personalities” are saturated with the “culture of enterprise.” So vacuous – or “smooth,” depending on one’s focus of analysis – is the process that there is no longer any space for the outward expression of “real” feelings – especially those involving so-called negative emotions – as every emotional energy must be targeted towards a marketing of the self. In the postemotional society then, it would seem that people are incapable of acting socially. Emotional communities in and out of work, and our moral commitments to them, have been deracinated, and replaced with universal cynicism, superficial niceties in the form of neutralized and buffered emotions, and entirely autonomous social actors who only pursue the satisfaction of their own desires. Meštrović summarizes this process, in what he describes as the collapse of the sacred into the profane:

... the category of the sacred really pertains to the emotional side of humanity, while the profane is the languishing, dull, non-emotional side. But the sacred canopy has collapsed, nothing is sacred anymore, and that which was formerly sacred and emotional has become public, pedestrian, accessible to all – in a word, it has been profaned.