THE STATE CONSTRUCTION OF AFFECT:  
POLITICAL ETHOS AND MENTAL HEALTH  
AMONG SALVADORAN REFUGEES

ABSTRACT. This essay seeks to extend current anthropological theorizing on emotion. Although anthropologists have convincingly established the specifically cultural status of emotion, recognition also of “state” (including sociopolitical institutions of nation-states) constructions of affect has been slow in coming. The present essay seeks to expand the emerging scholarly discourse on the emotions by examining the nexus among the role of the state in constructing a political ethos, the personal emotions of those who dwell in that ethos, and the mental health consequences for refugees. This analysis is intended as a bridge between analyses of the state construction of affect, on the one hand, and the phenomenology of those affects, on the other. To illustrate, I examine the state construction of affect and its traces in the narrative and clinical presentations of Salvadoran refugees in North America. The saliency of fear and anxiety among a group of psychiatric out-patients is framed by bodily experience, knowledge of illness, and the ethnopsychology of emotion within the context of chronic political violence and poverty. Distinctions between terror and torture, distress and disease are proposed as essential to an account of refugee experience. Future directions for the study of the “state construction of affect” are suggested.

You think this mountain is beautiful? I hate it. To me it means war. It’s nothing but a theater for this shitty war…

— Response of Comandante Jonas to a foreign journalist’s request to take pictures of the mountains, eastern front, El Salvador, 1983. (Quoted from Manlio Argueta’s Cuzcatlan: Where the Southern Sea Beats (1987:1).)

One can be a virgin with respect to Horror as one is virgin toward Voluptuousness.


INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the last decade, the intellectual landscape has been marked by an anthropological claim on the study of emotion (Abu-Lughod 1986; Myers 1979; Kleinman and Good 1985; Lutz 1988; Lutz and White 1986; Jenkins in press; Rosaldo 1980, 1984; Roseman 1990; B. Schieffelin and E. Ochs 1986; E. Schieffelin 1983; Shweder and LeVine 1984; White and Kirkpatrick 1985; Wikan 1990). Joining the existing discourses on emotion in philosophy, psychology, and physiology, anthropological studies of emotion have convinc-
ingly established the essential role of culture in constructing emotional experience and expression. The contemporary anthropological interest is rooted in traditions established by psychological anthropology (Bateson 1958; Benedict 1946; Hallowell 1955; Mead 1963; Sapir 1961) and enlivened by more recent interpretive-hermeneutic approaches seeking to collapse classical mind-body dualisms (Csordas 1983, 1990; Frank 1986; Gaines 1982; Good and Good 1982; Kleinman 1982, 1988; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). This intellectual current has led to the anthropological realization that psychobiological theories of emotion have advanced little else than European and North American ethnopsychologies of thought and emotion as somehow separate, mutually exclusive cultural objects. This development has sparked the current fluorescence of theorizing on culture and the self and asserts an inseparability of ideas and sentiments, cognition and affect, thoughts and feelings (Jenkins 1988b; Lutz 1988; Rosaldo 1984).

The present essay seeks to expand the emerging scholarly discourse on the emotions by examining the nexus among the role of the state in constructing a political ethos, the personal emotions of those who dwell in that ethos, and the mental health consequences for refugees.1 By political ethos, I mean the culturally standardized organization of feeling and sentiment pertaining to the social domains of power and interest.2 Recognition of the essential interrelations between the personal and the political has long been central to feminist scholarship (see Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974) but has yet to be more fully integrated in culture theory in medical and psychological anthropology.3

In a recent special issue of this journal concerning discourses on emotion, illness, and healing, Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good and colleagues raise, among other issues, the problem of state control of emotional discourse, defined as “the role of the state and other political, religious, and economic institutions in legitimizing, organizing, and promoting particular discourses on emotions” (DelVecchio Good, B. Good, and Fischer 1988:4). These authors note that examination of politicized passions has been slow in coming. In an ethnographic study of the role of the state in authorizing and sustaining discourses on sadness, they examine how the current Iranian Islamic state has appropriated a traditional religious discourse on grieving, martyrdom and the tragic by redefining it as part of the official state ideology for the Iranian citizenry concerning ideal, morally upstanding affective comportment. In another study of Iranian immigrants to the United States, B. Good, DelVecchio Good, and Moradi (1985) document the interplay of cultural themes, sociopolitical events, and depressive disorder. A similarly convincing case for the social production of affective disorders (in China) has been presented by Kleinman (1986).

The need to make a theoretical move from the state control of emotional discourse to the state construction of affect became particularly evident to me in the course of recent fieldwork with Salvadoran refugees seeking psychological