

Touch

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I want to say 3 short things – largely using the words of others – and one longer thing – in Introduction to this session

I was drawn to this subject in part by the following in a novel by Catherine Hutton (1813)

“Dancing introduces a kind of familiarity that would be quite inadmissible in a drawing room. When a gentleman solicits the honour of your hand, it is not a figure of speech; your hand really belongs to him, for the time; and if he persists in taking it a little after the time, it would be very ill-natured to withdraw it – unless one did not like him. For my part I found something so admirably persuasive in the touch of a man I do like, even through two pairs of gloves, that I could not find it in my heart to cut short its eloquence.”

The following is cited by Stuart Carrol in his P and P piece on revenge and reconciliation:

Those superior to us in degree and condition, with whom we have a certain familiarity or sociability (*domestichezza*), such as those who also call us friends, [it is permitted] to embrace them between the hips and under the armpit, at the same as making a sign of wishing to kiss their hand, and with the knees bent in sign of reverence. Equals embrace around the neck. The superior embraces his inferior around the neck only with only one arm, and when he does it with both arms it is a great sign of friendship.⁹⁷

Third: I quote from Peypys’ Diary for 23 February 1669

‘ therefore I now did take them (his wife and girls) to Westminster Abbey and there did show them all the tombs very finely, having one with us alone (there being other company this day to see the tombs, it being Shrove Tuesday); and here we did see, by perticular favour, the body of Queen Katherine of Valois, and had the upper part of her body in my hands. And I did kiss her mouth, reflecting upon it that did kiss a Queen, and that this was my birthday, 36 years old, that I did first kiss a Queen.

These seem to me to be moments of touch – perhaps rarely commented on – but a crucial part of the way we are in the world – in which physical sensation and its textures connect us to objects and people in the world in ways that produce a heightened sense of ourselves and of our being in that world.

Here’s the fourth thing:

One of the things we have been exploring recently in the EHRC’s Memory Group has been the question of how to think about memory. In particular, questioning the tendency to ascribe to it some of the features of a hard drive – that you access and that stores discrete memories like computer files. This might, in fact, be doubly misleading. First, because unlike (I hope) my word documents, every act of remembering is also always a re-interpretation – as the psychologist Charles Fernyhough says in his *Pieces of Light* – Memories are changed by the very process of reconstructing them and every (reported) memory ...is likely to have been contaminated by previous acts of remembering. (13).

But the second way it might be misleading is by treating cognitive memory as the essential file store for memory. Psychologists (such as Warwick's James Tresilian) are also starting to think of memory, not as something stored in a discrete location of the brain, but as embedded in the circuits of an activity – so we don't go to the black box to recall how to ride a bike – we have muscle memory – and a whole set of circuits that are fired up when we engage in the practice. I don't have a 'how to ride a bike' memory – but a body that knows and is habituated to doing it. And if that's true of bike riding, it's probably also true of lots of other activities – dancing, fencing, making love, flirting, bargaining, negotiating, enacting rituals, performing etc. Of course, we also – in a broad sense – have cognitive memories of or about such things – but what is so often surprising to us, is how the cognitive memory pales against the bodily remembrance or re-experience – the scent or taste of Proustian madeleines jolts us into a bodily remembering that engages a fuller range of bodily circuits. And those bodily circuits are often (although certainly not always) linked to touch, the manipulation of objects, and the incorporation of things and people into practices.

For historians, it seems to me that these kinds of questions and insights should inform our work – especially because they demand a more embodied sense of what moves people and what constellation of activities become deeply imbedded in their daily lives. I think this is asking for something different from a history of emotions.

In our Covid dominated world I suspect we are inclined to see touch in rather positive terms but I also want to underline that many such practices can be negative in various ways. Let me explain.

In Jean Amery's work on resentment – focusing on the experience of torture at the hands of the Gestapo and his prison guards in the second world war – he invokes a set of bodily experiences inflicted on him as, in effect, a practice of torture which has the feature of its being embodied in a physical human relationship. He can recall it – but it is not summoned only cognitively, but also emotionally and bodily. His experience will not go away – 'Twenty-two years later I am still dangling over the ground by dislocated arms, panting and accusing myself.' And that bodily experience, the relationships that it imposed on him, and its permanence underlies his resentment and his insistence that his experience cannot be forgotten nor can his torturers (or those complicit with them) be forgiven – because that leaves him locked in those relationships, not freed from them.

I find Amery's discussion instructive – his bodily experiences are not forgettable – that this is not just a filed memory – but an existential bodily one (not *just* a bodily one – but a partly bodily one).

One dimension that Amery emphasizes is that he rejects the relativization of time that much cognitive memory entails – a memory that says 'that was then, this is now.' For Amery, his resistance derives from the nature of his experience at the hands of his torturer: 'the moral person demands annulment of time – in the particular case under question, by nailing the criminal to his deed. Thereby, and through a moral turning back of the clock, the latter can join his victim as a fellow human being' (72) That is to say, true memory for Amery involves some form of a re-embodiment of that invasive relationship – with another outcome: 'When SS-man Wajs stood before the firing squad, he experienced the moral truth of his crimes. At that moment, he was with *me* – and I was no longer alone with the shovel handle. When they led him to the place of execution, the antiman had once again become a fellow man.' (70)

One way of putting this is that his exposure to the absolute sovereignty of another's invasive will that so defiled his body, can only be levelled (rectified and absolved) by a similarly violent reversal of standing – so that the torturer feels the sharp end of his own practice. And I want to suggest that the acuteness of the bodily experience of invasion – of deeply unwanted touch – is similar for victims of

assault and other forms of subordination: a memory of what the body has been made to do against its will by another body whose will is sovereign over it. This is an invasion of touch that marginalizes the intellect and the will – that leaves an impression that cannot be expunged except through a re-establishment of some kind of bodily equivalence – where we should take the word 'impression' literally – it is a bending and shaping of the body into which the subject remains locked.

I don't think this is matter for a history of the emotions - since it seems to me that emotions are just one component or concomitant of these complicated embodied practices – and as much their outcome as anything like their essence. But I do think we need to do more to address such practices as central to the production and reproduction of history – sometimes positively – but often negatively – for example in the effortless assumption of superiority of the Etonian elite – not just a mental attitude, but a set of postures, movements, and behaviour (a way of interacting with the world) that embodies and reproduces his world and dominates those who do not share it; or of toxic masculinity; or the reproduction of the imperium of the colonial world in ways that re-animate the inequalities and subjections of the past; and so on. And while this is partly a larger question about how (with what degree of insouciance) some people move around their world; it is also about the embodiment of these forms in interpersonal behaviour and in practices of touch in relations of inequality, and about their more than incidental effects. Witness the chilling picture on the webpage of Trump with Theresa May in his paw. I don't read that image as expressing his Machiavellianism – but as the insouciant bodily assumption of control – the unthinking character of so many similar forms of touch that are also semi-conscious expressions of power.

And this kind of inquiry, which focuses on embodied practices and on people's engagement with objects and with others, and thinks about how practices organize and dominate both spaces and the relational positions of others, identifies a world of experience that carries with it patterns of domination and subordination, as well as agency and passivity. (A picture, then, in which touch is often a crucial component – but in which it is not the only dimension – a life in which no one will touch you is, after all, a distinct kind of sensory embodiment).

The quotation from Stuart Carrol perfectly captures the intersection of inequality with bodily practices of touch. And while Pepys' kiss of the dead queen on his birthday is certainly weird – it is a bodily interaction imposed on many of the women whom he encounters – it speaks to his unconsciousness of the invasiveness of his touch – even as he performs his deference to his own masters and betters.

And what seems to matter for Catherine Hutton's heroine – are the sets of possibility – and the emotions – but also the fantasies that the experience of touch summons (when with a man she likes). But as historians we also need to look behind those emotions and probe the embedding of behaviours and forms of contact within and between bodies and the extent to which they open similar or different possibilities for those engaged, and how far these bodily performances are part of a wider set of practices of power.

So that's why I thought touch might be a good topic!