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Affect in the Key of Politics*

Felt Transition

The notion of affect takes many forms. To get anywhere with the concept, you have to retain the manyness of its forms. It's not something that can be reduced to one thing. Mainly because it's not a thing. It's an event, or a dimension of every event. What interests me in the concept is that if you approach it respecting its variety, you are presented with a field of questioning, a problematic field, where the customary divisions that questions about subjectivity, becoming, or the political are usually couched in do not apply. My starting point is the basic Spinozan definition of affect, which is an "ability to affect or be affected." Right off the bat, this cuts transversally across a persistent division, probably *the* most persistent division. Because the ability to affect and the ability to be affected are two facets of the same event. One face is turned towards what you might be tempted to isolate as an object, the other towards what you might isolate as a subject. Here, they are two sides of the same coin. There is an affectation, and it is happening in-between. You

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start with the in-betweenness. No need to detour through well-rehearsed questions of philosophical foundations in order to cobble together a unity. You start in the middle, as Deleuze always taught, with the dynamic unity of an event.

There is a second part of the Spinozian definition taken up by Deleuze that is not cited as often. It is that a power to affect and be affected governs a transition, where a body passes from one state of capacitation to a diminished or augmented state of capacitation. This comes with the corollary that the transition is *felt*. A distinction is asserted between two levels, one of which is feeling and the other capacitation or activation. But the distinction comes in the form of a connection. This separation-connection between feeling and activation situates the account between what we would normally think of as the self on the one hand and the body on the other, in the unrolling of an event that's a becoming of the two together.

This already yields a number of terms that can be put to use and developed. First, the feeling of the transition as the body moves from one power of existence to another has certain separability from the event it is bound

up with, by virtue of its distinction from the capacitation activating the passage. What is felt is the *quality* of the experience. The account of affect will then have to directly address forms of experience, forms of life, on a qualitative register. Second, the felt transition leaves a trace, it constitutes a memory. Consequently, it can't be restricted to that one occurrence. It will return. It has already returned, in some capacity. It was already part of a series of repetitions, to the extent that the body has a past.

That's the third point: the capacitation of the body as it's gearing up for a passage towards a diminished or augmented state is completely bound up with the lived past of the body. That past includes what we think of as subjective elements, such as habits, acquired skills, inclinations, desires, even willings, all of which come in patterns of repetition. This doesn't make the event any less rooted in the body. The past that the body carries forward in serial fashion includes levels we think of as physical and biological, such as genetic inheritance and phylogenesis. So there's a reactivation of the past in passage toward a changed future, cutting transversally across dimensions of time, between past and future, and between pasts of different orders. This in-between time or transversal time is the time of the event. This temporality enables, and requires you, to rethink all of these terms – bodily capacitation, felt transition, quality of lived experience, memory, repetition, seriation, inclination -- in dynamic relation to each other.

Relation

If there is one key term, that's it: relation. When you start in-between, what you're in the middle of is a region of

relation. Occurrent relation, because it's all about event. Putting the terms together, you realize straight away that the relational event will play out differently every time. In repeating, it takes up the past differently. In taking up the past differently, it creates new potentials for the future. The region of occurrent relation is a point of potentiation. It is where things begin anew. Where things begin anew is where they were already present in tendency.

If there are two key terms, tendency comes next. The patterns of movement through these affective transitions are weighted for a particular body or particular situations, as more or less accessible, more or less ready to go. There's an activation not only of the body, but of the body's tendencies, as they move into and through situations. In taking account of this, you get a relational complex, a nexus, rather than a particular definition. The base definition – to affect and be affected, in a felt passage to a varied power of existence – opens a problematic field rather than ending in a particular solution. You are left with a matrix of variation that forces you to rethink the terms involved each time. You have to regenerate them to use them. It's not a general definition that you can apply. It's not a structure you can presuppose. On the other hand, it's also not the case that you're starting without any presuppositions. To start in the middle is precisely not to perform a phenomenological reduction. It is to accept the challenge to regenerate your terms, and their cohesion to each other, at each repeated step in your thinking through the nexus. Rather than a definition, what you have is a proposition, less in the logical sense than in the sense of an invitation. Starting from affect in this way is an invitation for an indefinitely constructive thinking of embodied, relational becoming. The emphasis on embodiment, variation, and relation gives it an immediately political aspect.

Politics and Pure Experience

Everything re-begins, in a very crowded, overpopulated world. Even one body alone is pre-populated - by instincts, by inclinations, by teeming feelings and masses of memories, conscious and nonconscious, with all manner of shadings in between. Even one body alone is political. The question is always “how:” how to move that crowding into a new constitution, the constitution of a becoming.

Calling affect, or that felt moment of bodily moving on, calling that intersubjective is misleading if intersubjective is taken to mean that we start from a world in which there are already subjects that are preconstituted, or a pre-given structure of subject positions ready for subjects to come occupy. What is in question is precisely the emergence of the subject, its primary constitution, or its reemergence and reconstitution. The subject of an experience emerges from a field of conditions which are not that subject yet, where it is just coming into itself. Those conditions are not yet necessarily even subjective in any normal sense. Before the subject, there’s an in-mixing, a field of budding relation too crowded and heterogeneous to call intersubjective. It’s not at a level where things have settled into categories like subject and object. It’s the level of what William James called pure experience. When I say that it all comes back to the body, I don’t mean the body as a thing apart from the self or subject. I mean that the body *is* that region of in-mixing from which subjectivity emerges. It is the coming together of the world, for experience, in a here – and - now prior to any possibility of assigning categories like subject or object. That affective region we were talking about is not in-between in the intersubjective sense. And it’s not intentional in the sense of already carrying a subject - object polarity.

It’s a brewing, the world stirring. It’s a coming event, through which such categories will return. Their rearing depends on the event. It’s not the event that depends on their already being in place.

Microperception

The event’s rearing comes as a shock. Affect for me is inseparable from the concept of shock. It doesn’t have to be a drama. It’s really more about micro - shocks, the kind that populate every moment of our lives. For example a change in focus, or a rustle at the periphery of vision that draws the gaze toward it. In every shift of attention, there is an interruption, a momentary cut in the mode of onward deployment of life. The cut can pass unnoticed, striking imperceptibly, with only its effects entering conscious awareness as they unroll. This is the onset of the activation I was referring to earlier. I’d go so far as to say that this onset of experience is by nature imperceptible.

This is one way of understanding “microperception,” a concept of great importance to Deleuze and Guattari. Microperception is not smaller perception, it’s a perception of a qualitatively different kind. It’s something that is felt without registering consciously. It registers only in its effects. According to this notion of shock, there is always a commotion under way, a “something doing” as James would say. There is always a something-doing cutting in, interrupting whatever continuities are in progress. For things to continue, they have to re-continue. They have to re-jig around the interruption. At the instant of re-jigging, the body braces for what will come. It in-braces, in the sense that it returns to its potential for more of life to come, and that potential is immanent to its own arising.

You can sometimes feel the in-bracing itself, most noticeably in startles or frights. Before you can even consciously recognize what you're afraid of, or even feel that it is yourself that is the subject of the feeling, you are catapulted into a feeling of the frightfulness of the situation. It only dawns on you in the next instant that you'd better figure out what might have done the catapulting, and what you should do about. It is only then that you own the feeling as your own, and recognize it as a content of your life, an episode in your personal history. But in the instant of the affective hit, there is no content yet. All there is the affective quality, coinciding with the feeling of the interruption, with the kind of felt transition I talked about before. That affective quality is all there is to the world in that instant. It takes over life, fills the world, for an immeasurable instant of shock. Microperception is this purely affective rebeginning of the world.

Microperception is bodily. There is no fright, or any affect for that matter, without an accompanying movement in or of the body. This is the famous James-Lange thesis. In fact, the thesis goes further, so far as to say that this bodily commotion is what an emotion *is*. James calls it emotion, but at this level it is what we're calling affect. The James-Lange thesis has been widely criticized as reductive, but this is to misunderstand it. Because the body, in this eventful rebeginning, carries tendencies reviving the past and already striving toward a future. In its commotion are capacities reactivating, being primed to play out, in a heightening or diminishing of their collective power of existence. The body figures here as a cut in the continuity of relation, filled with potential for re-relating, with a difference. Microperceptual shock is like a re-cueing of our bodily powers of existence. Here, the body is what Peirce calls a "material quality:" a coming

quality of experience that is being actively lived - in before it's actually lived out. It's lived - in in intensity, in a kind of existential agitation, a poisoning or posturing for the coming event, a kind of recoil, not to withdraw from the world, but rather to brace for it again, and for how else it will be.

The world in which we live is literally made of these reinaugural microperceptions, cutting in, cueing emergence, priming capacities. Every body is at every instant in thrall to any number of them. A body is a complex of in-bracings playing out complexly and in serial fashion. The tendencies and capacities activated do not necessarily bear fruit. Some will be summoned to the verge of unfolding, only to be left behind, unactualized. But even these will have left their trace. In that moment of interruptive commotion, there's a productive indecision. There's a constructive suspense. Potentials resonate and interfere, and this modulates what actually eventuates. Even what doesn't happen has a modulatory effect. Whitehead had a word for this. He called it "negative prehension." It's a somewhat paradoxical concept. It refers to an un-felt feeling entering positively into the constitution of an experience by dint of its active exclusion from it. The concept of affect is tied to the idea of modulation occurring at a constitutive level where many somethings are doing, most of them un-felt. Or again, felt only in effect. No less real for passing un-felt.

Micropolitics

Say there are a number of bodies indexed to the same cut, primed to the same cue, shocked in concert. What happens is a collective event. It's distributed across those bodies.

Since each body will carry a different set of tendencies and capacities, there is no guarantee that they will act in unison even if they are cued in concert. However different their eventual actions, all will have unfolded from the same suspense. They will have been attuned – differentially – to the same interruptive commotion. “Affective attunement” – a concept from Daniel Stern – is a crucial piece to the affective puzzle. It is a way of approaching affective politics that is much more supple than notions more present in the literature of what’s being called the “affective turn,” like imitation or contagion, because it finds difference in unison, and concertation in difference. Because of that, it can better reflect the complexity of collective situations, as well as the variability that can eventuate from what might be considered the “same” affect. There is no sameness of affect. There is affective difference in the same event. Reactions to fear, to that classic example again, vary wildly, and even vary significantly at different times in the same individual’s life.

Politics, approached affectively, is an art of emitting the interruptive signs, triggering the cues that attune bodies while activating their capacities differentially. Affective politics is inductive. Bodies can be inducted into, or attuned to, certain regions of tendency, futurity, and potential, they can be induced into inhabiting the same affective environment, even if there is no assurance they will act alike in that environment. A good example is an alarm, a sign of threat or danger. Even if you conclude in the next instant that it’s a false alarm, you will have come to that conclusion in an environment that is effectively one of threat. Others who have heard the alarm may well respond differently, but they will be responding differently together, as inhabitants of the same affective environment. Everyone registering the alarm

will have been attuned to the same threat event, in one way or another. It is the sum total of the different ways of being interpellated by the same event that will define what it will have been politically. The event can’t be fully predetermined. It will be as it happens. For there to be uniformity of response, other factors must have been active to pre-channel tendencies. Politics of conformity pivoting on the signalling of threat, like the politics that held sway during the Bush administration, must work on many levels and at many rhythms of bodily priming to ensure a relative success. And again, there will be minor lines that won’t be emphasized or come out into relief or be fully enacted but that everyone will have felt in that unfeeling way of negatively prehending. Those are left as a reservoir of political potential. It is a potential that is immediately collective. It’s not a mere possibility, it’s an active part of the constitution of that situation, it’s just one that hasn’t been fully developed, that hasn’t been fully capacitated for unfolding. This means that there are potential alter - politics at the collectively in - braced heart of every situation, even the most successfully conformist in its mode of attunement. You can return to that reservoir of real but unexpressed potential, and re - cue it. This would be a politics of micro - perception: a micropolitics. The Obama campaign’s recueing of fear toward hope might be seen as targeting that micropolitical level, interestingly, through macro-media means.

Even in the most controlled political situation, there’s a surplus of unacted - out potential that is collectively felt. If cued into, it can remodulate the situation. As Deleuze and Guattari liked to say, there is no ideology and never was. What they mean by that is no situation is ever fully predetermined by ideological structures or codings. Any account paying exclusive attention to that level is fatally

incomplete. No situation simply translates ideological inculcations into action. There's always an event, and the event always includes dimensions that aren't completely actualized, so it's always open to a degree, it's always dynamic and in re-formation. To be in effect, ideological predeterminations have to enter the event and *take* effect. They have to reassert themselves, to make themselves effectively ingredient to the event. Their effectiveness is always an accomplishment, a renewed victory, and what needs to be accomplished can fail. Micropolitics, affective politics, seeks the degrees of openness of any situation, in hopes of priming an alter-accomplishment. Just modulating a situation in a way that amplifies a previously unfelt potential to the point of perceptibility is an alter-accomplishment.

Aesthetic Politics

Even though affect necessarily begins with and returns us to shock, shock mastery is not at all what we're after, I don't think. How can "we" master what forms us? And reforms us at each instant, before we know it? But that is not to say that we're impotent before ontopower. Quite the contrary, our lives are capacitated by it. We live it, the power of existence that we are expresses it.

For many, this conjures up concerns about fascism, and the critique of fascism in the post-war period created a mistrust of any form of affective politics. I agree that the potential for fascism is there, but I don't agree that it's inherent to affective politics. The mistrust of affect seems to come from seeing affect as a primitive stimulus – response system. I connect it instead to priming, which does not have the linear cause – effect structure of

stimulus - response, but has to do instead with modulation, which has to do with interference and resonance, which are nonlinear. Stimulus - response is a limit case. It's that case of a habit that has become a reflex, lost its adaptive power, its powers of variation, its force of futurity, that has ceased to be the slightest bit surprised by the world. It's a tired habit that has come as close to being an efficient cause as a power of repetition can get. It has let go of the "quasi" in its causality. There is also a sense in the critiques of affective politics as fascist that nonconscious process is an absence of thought. I follow Deleuze and Guattari in saying that nonconscious process is the birth of thought. It is germinal thought, moved by the force of time to express powers of existence in coming action.

From the critical theory point of view, I just compound the sin, because I think that advocating affective politics is advocating aesthetic politics. Aesthetic politics is often also thought to be synonymous with fascism. I think about the connection between affective politics and aesthetic politics in terms of Whitehead's idea of "contrast." Contrasts are tendential unfoldings that are held together in the same situation. They are alternate termini that come together in the instant, even though their actual unfoldings are mutually exclusive. Their mutual exclusiveness is a kind of creative tension. It is the contrasts between termini that interfere and resonate, and modulate what comes. The specious present is the drop of experience that is one with that unfolding. It is the feeling of the resolution of the tension, as the event plays itself out, for the process to then start all over again. If thought is the effective presence of what is not actually present, a terminus is an element of thought. Then multiple termini together are an intensification of thought. The specious

present feels this intensity of thinking pass into action. Normally the intensity itself is overshadowed by the effectiveness of the action it passes into. Whitehead defines the aesthetic in terms of this intensity of contrasts. An aesthetic act brings this contrastive intensity out from under the shadow of action's instrumentality or functional aim. It brings the contrastive intensity of active potential into the specious present as such, to stand alone, with no other value than itself. The aesthetic act extends the creative tension of contrast that characterizes the emergence of every action. It prolongs the suspension of the cut, the commotion of interference and resonance, gives it duration, so that it passes the threshold of perceptibility and is consciously felt as potential. This prevents terminus from being an automatic feed forward to the end, like a reflex response to a stimulus. Resolution is suspended. The termini in play remain virtual ends. Their mutual exclusivity is still informing the situation, contributing to what it might be, but the tension doesn't have to resolve itself to be consciously felt and thought. Aesthetic politics is irresolute. It's the thinking - feeling of the virtual incompleteness of definitive action.

This might not sound political, at least in the way it's usually meant. But it is, because the virtuality is of an event to come, and as we saw before the event always has the potential to affectively attune a multiplicity of bodies to its happening, differentially. Aesthetic politics brings the collectivity of shared events to the fore, as differential, a multiple, bodily potential for what might come. Difference is built into this account. Affective politics, understood as aesthetic politics, is dissensual, in the sense that it holds contrasting alternatives together without immediately demanding that one alternative eventuate and the others evaporate. It makes thought - felt different

capacities for existence, different life potentials, different forms of life, without immediately imposing a choice between them. The political question, then, is not how to find a resolution. It's not how to impose a solution. It's how to keep the intensity in what comes next. The only way is through actual differentiation. Different lines of unfolding bring the contrast into actuality, between them. The political question is then what Isabelle Stengers calls an "ecology of practices." How do you tend this proliferation of differentiation? How can the lines not clash and destroy each other? How do they live together? The "solution" is not to resolve the tension through a choice, but to modulate it into a symbiosis. A cross-fertilization of capacitations that live out, to the fullest, the intensity of the event of their coming together.

The Uncommon

The notion of the common is widely used today in discussions of what an alter-politics involves. The concepts I privilege in relation to affect and affective politics are differential: differential attunement, symbiotic dissensus. I have a certain discomfort with the rhetoric of the common, particularly in phrases like "what we need is to find a common language." I just don't think that the possibility of a common language exists anymore, if it ever did. And if it did, I wouldn't want it. I don't think I'd be alone. That in itself uncommons it. It would have to be imposed. It would necessitate an exercise of power – over, very different from empowerment, the power – to of ontopower. I wouldn't want it because in my way of thinking it would be inaeesthetic. It would be de – intensifying. It would flatten affect by standardizing response. It would put politics back on the uncreative road to reflex.

Consensus is always the product of a power – over. It is a habituation to it, even if it's a soft form of it. I can't imagine a "common language" that is not consensus building in a de - intensifying way.

The world is too complex to hold to that as a model. The fragmentation of nations into sub - communities, the accompanying increase in the number of nation – states formed from these communities, the destructuring effects of movements of capital, the way these unchained capital flows enable or force a constant movement of people, goods, ideas, and information across borders – all of this has created a hyper – complex situation of flow and variation over which there's no effective oversight. There's no vantage point from which you could encompass it all, there's no shared perspective from which to find a common language or build a consensus or share a rationality. The situation is constitutively dissensual. Rather than going back to the failed project of finding a common language, purpose, or rationality, it would seem that the complexity of that dissensus should be the starting point for politics. Why accept as the starting point a reduction of difference, a channeling into tired habit? That's to start with defeat. Taking complexity for a starting point, broadly speaking, is what "ecological" means. I see affective intensity and an aesthetics of varying life potential as the elements of an ecology of practices of the symbiotic kind called for by Stengers, and before her by Guattari. From this symbiotic perspective, an anti-capitalist politics begins by affirming the variability and potential for forms of life unleashed by capitalism itself. It continues the differentiation of forms of life already under way, but by other means, governed by other constellations of termini and embodying other values.