

# “But in what way precisely is this political?”: Brian Massumi’s Cartography of Potential

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Brian Massumi. *Politics of Affect*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015. 228 pp.

Let’s start—as remains the apparent necessity in every discussion of affect, despite these years since the so-called affective turn—with the definition of “affect” at the center of Brian Massumi’s *Politics of Affect* volume. Definition is necessary, perhaps, for the same reason as it is doomed to remain unsettled, because, “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” (47). As dimension rather than thing, Massumi’s affect is less tangible than even mood or emotion. “By ‘affect’ I don’t mean ‘emotion’ in the everyday sense,” he writes. Instead—readers learn again and again in this volume—“The way I use it comes primarily from Spinoza. He talks of the body in terms of its capacity for affecting or being affected” (3). This view of affect will come as no surprise to those already familiar with Massumi’s work, or for those familiar with the works of some of his predecessors (and frequent points of reference), chief among them Gilles Deleuze. (The list Massumi himself provides is incomplete, but pretty close: “Henri Bergson, William James, Alfred North Whitehead, Gilbert Simondon, Félix Guattari,” and Deleuze, all of whom took “change as primary” and understood “the task of philosophy as understanding the world as an ongoing process in continual transformation” [viii].)

Such readers, in fact, will find little here that is new—and not just because *Politics of Affect* largely reprints existing interviews, ranging from roughly 2001 to 2013 and framed by a brief preface and a critique of twelve common “misconceptions” (204, and “missed conceptions” 205) of affect that Massumi offers “in lieu of a conclusion” (204–215). Of the volume’s 28 footnoted citations, 12 of them—almost half, that is—are of Massumi’s own individual or collaborative works.

This volume, then, is perhaps of less use to veteran readers of Massumi than it is to neophytes, and to those (and I count myself among them) who seek clarification about just what exactly is so political about contemporary incarnations of Deleuzian

strands of affect theory. For these readers, *Politics of Affect* delivers an unusually clear and comprehensible set of arguments, a few of which I will address here. Usefully, the book's format offers a series of stand-ins for potential readers. Its series of interviewers range from enthusiastic elaborators of Massumi's ideas to those more interested in positioning Massumi's work in its Spinozist-Deleuzian lineage or voicing common points of disagreement and confusion. Interviewer Joel McKim, for example, asks Massumi to respond to charges that "affective politics" are at worst "inherently fascist" (65) and at best apolitical. "I can see the importance of this [...] for understanding processes of creativity and invention," McKim admits, "but in what way precisely is this political?" (67-68).

In fact, argues Massumi, affect is *not* exactly political, and it certainly belongs to no single political orientation. Rather, "affect is proto-political. It concerns the first stirrings of the political. [...] It is the cutting edge of change" (*ix*). Nor can affect (of the sort under discussion here) be intentionally deployed in the service of any particular political aim: "It cannot impose itself. It can only catch on" (105). This brand of affect is characterized by a capacity to act and be acted on (to affect and be affected); it is not the acting. Affects "are our angle of participation in processes larger than ourselves" (6). They are not contained within a subject. Rather, affect is best discussed, argues Massumi, through the language of thresholds (3), "openings" and "grey areas" (39), or "in-betweenness" (48). It is about orientations toward events—orientations that make available "the virtual co-presence of potentials" (5).

Affect is not a thing, like a feeling or an emotion; an "emotion is a very partial expression of affect" that "only draws on" certain "memories and only activates certain reflexes and tendencies" (5). Emotions, for Massumi, have their own political utility: "Joy can be very disruptive" (44); and "anger and laughter are [...] powerful because they interrupt a situation. [...] They interrupt the flow of meaning that's taking place" (8). These emotions can express affect, and they can result in "an affective change in [a] situation" (11), but they are not affect itself, which co-exists with process, tendency, and orientation, not the kinds of namable, stable concepts implied by emotions and feelings.

We might ask McKim's question again: yes, okay, "but in what way precisely is this political?" (68). Even Massumi's most productive, political versions of affect are temporary and potential immersions and attunements that we cannot "pre-define" (117). The closest we can come to diagramming affect in advance of the political (or other) event is to think of it as "a cartography of potential. It's about techniques for moving into and out of the immersive field of life complexity in a way that is oriented, or reorienting, but not in pre-articulated directions – inventively" (117). It is perhaps no wonder that Massumi's not-conclusion will finally resort to constructing a nega-

tive definition of affect, by repeating what it is *not*: it is not “individual” (205); it is not “asocial” (205); it is not outside of culture (208); it “is not prescriptive” (209); and, importantly, it is not necessarily “good” (209). It “can be fascistic or progressive; reactionary or revolutionary. It all depends on the orientation of the transindividual desires speculatively gestured into motion” (209).

*This* is how and why we should (and, Massumi argues, *must*) understand the politics of affect. Affects and relational fields can, are, and will be used by, for example, “the capitalist logic of surplus-value production” (21). Like Deleuze (or related contemporary thinkers, Hardt and Negri), Massumi is more accurately described as an anti-capitalist than as, say, a doctrinaire brand of Marxist. He finds “troubling and confusing,” in fact, “a certain kind of convergence between the dynamic of capitalist power and the dynamic of resistance” (21). As a result, much space in *Politics of Affect* will be dedicated to rejecting “traditional Marxist notions of ideology critique and vanguard action” (107). Ideology critique does not sufficiently recognize change as primary; “power structures are secondary effects of affective encounters, and ideologies are secondary expressions of power structures. Ideology is on the side of effects – twice over” (93). If we want to be on the side of *causes*, we must think in the micro, rather than the macro; we must think of process, not structure. “Any stabilizing structuring is *emergent*, and self-improvised. This makes variation and change more fundamental than the reproduction of the same.” The traditional Marxist’s view of “society as a structure [...] is inverted” (87).

So, since we have no stable structure to resist, a productive, affective politics, “engages becoming, rather than judging what is” (71). It orients itself toward potential, but toward no *specific* potential outcome. It *primes* potential change: “Micropolitics, affective politics, seeks the degree of openness in 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” (58).

The skeptic might view this as a minor politics, at best, not just a micro-politics. (And, in this way, the skeptic would be right: Deleuze regularly celebrated the minor, the minority, and the minoritarian. Affect theorist Sianne Ngai celebrates the potential of the minor, ugly feeling over the major, revolutionary one.) But Massumi’s retort is that a more major, more macro-approach would inevitably replace structure with structure, power with power, ideology with counter ideology, old system of rationality with new system of rationality. He has his own questions for those more traditional brands of politics—the ideology critique that he suggests would coagulate process (88):

How can this [Marxist, for example] undoing of ideology be achieved—with-

out inculcating a counter-ideology? How can a counter-ideology be inculcated without applying new mechanisms of power? How can those who most directly apply those mechanisms of power not become a new class, with its own special interests (the critical-ideological avant-garde turning into an apparatchik class)? [...] In short, how can the dominant ideology be changed without imposing a new one that in the end reinscribes much the same structure, and works with much the same presuppositions, as the old one – and is no less a structure of domination? (86-87)

Massumi argues that the way around coagulation, the way around structure, the way around the cycle of ideology and counter-ideology, the way around hardened presupposition, is a turn to affect as strategy, orientation, “main ethical concern” (34), and critical mode of understanding: “affect is now much more important for understanding power, even state power narrowly defined, than concepts like ideology” (32).

If McKim's question stands in for a skeptical reader looking for a “precise” politics of affect, rather than a *mere* creative orientation, such as the brand we imagine as best suited for artistic invention, then this volume's response is that the two impulses are not so far apart. Massumi's affective approach to politics is “in some ways a performative, theatrical or aesthetic approach to politics” (34). Perhaps frustratingly, even he is “not exactly sure what that kind of politics would look like,” but, “in some basic way it would be an aesthetic politics, because its aim would be to expand the range of affective potential – which is what aesthetic practice has always been about” (36). To expand the range of affective potential is to prepare for potential openings and opportunities for movement and change, to make the body “attuned to [...] certain regions of tendency, futurity and potential” (56), rather than making it rigid (37) in preparation for a specific “event” that “can't be fully predetermined” (57).

Necessarily, Massumi's argument “does not arrive at any final answers. It does not even seek solutions” (xi). His non-goal goal is, however, revolutionary. It's just not in the service of any particular revolution. He is out for the “disabling or disabling [of] presuppositions” and the “implan[ing of] new presuppositions” (117). That is, Massumi's politics does not seek to change our minds so much as it seeks to reorient what shapes our minds. He wants to “implant new tendencies into that hyper-complex ecological field of life” (117). It's an attempt at rewiring that gets to the heart of current philosophical questions about perception and presupposition.<sup>2</sup> Massumi insists that one's participation in any event “happens before you know it – or as you

<sup>2</sup> The relevance here is evidenced by (and was explored at) a recent 2016 NEH Summer Institute on the topic of Presupposition and Perception: Reasoning, Ethics, Politics, and Aesthetics. (I owe a debt to this institute for my own recent thinking on these issues, particularly at the intersection of philosophy and issues of social justice.)

know it, abductively. Active participation precedes conscious perception” (195), so we should aim to be open and oriented toward potential and possibility. This is where we will find “degrees of freedom” because “there are any number of things that could happen [...] that might modulate the field’s complexion of potential, altering its presuppositions on the fly” (195).

A perhaps obvious remaining counterargument here would point toward *literal* restrictions of freedom—the enslaved or imprisoned body, for example, or the body in constant peril at the hands of a violent, racist state. Massumi himself admits that the situation he describes “doesn’t mean that police functions and the other old disciplinary forms of power are over and done with. [...] In fact they tend to proliferate and often get more vehement in their application precisely because the field that they are in is no longer controlled overall by their kind of power, so they’re in a situation of structural insecurity” (28). Here, Massumi makes room (if only very little room) to deploy a brand of action we might describe as something far more temporary than even a so-called strategic essentialism, with the warning that even here we must be wary of coagulation:

Obviously a disadvantaged group has to assess its interests and fight for certain rights, certain rights of passage and access, certain resources—often survival itself is in the balance. But at the same time, if any group, disadvantaged or otherwise, identifies itself completely with its self-interests it’s living the fiction that it is a separate autonomy. It is missing the potential that comes from taking the risk of making an event of the way to relate to other people [...] cutting yourself off from your own potential to change and intensify your life. (41–42)

To buy into Massumi’s politics of affect, then, one must not only agree that his micropolitics is politics (and is politics enough), but must also consider much of Marxism—as well as “political actions that only operate in terms of the self-interest of identified groups occupying recognizable social categories like male/female, unemployed/employed”—ultimately of “limited usefulness,” doomed to result in “creating a sort of rigidity—a hardening of the arteries!” (42). Just as his politics of affect and its cartographies of potential are aesthetic but not *just* that, so too does he leave room for “defending rights based on an identification with a certain categorized social group, that asserts and defends a self-interest but doesn’t *just* do that” (42, emphasis added).

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