

consequences. We cannot, and should not in my view, insist on becoming-other over and above acknowledging what has been lost in the past and present, because we need to be able to take stock, and not just of those left standing. In this respect, we need to be all too human, rather than seeking too soon to see with different eyes.

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Powers of affirmation: Response to Lisa Baraitser, Patrick Hanafin and Clare Hemmings

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Let me thank first of all my colleagues for their thoughtful and generous comments on my work. I feel very inadequate in trying to do justice to their critical insights.

I shall consequently limit my ambitions to the simple task of explaining a few concepts that have guided my work over the past 5 years.

The starting point is the insight I share with Patrick Hanafin that 'the traditional bounded subject of liberal legalism' is situated within the horizon of mortality as the defining feature of his agency (the gender is no coincidence). My project of affirmative politics is an attempt to relocate critical praxis within a non-necrological perspective and hence to stress vitalism and productive activity. In so doing, indeed, I cross the thin line that separates cultural critique from political praxis, as Clare Hemmings astutely notes. Insofar as psychoanalytic theory partakes of a Hegelian tradition of negativity, I also put some distance between myself and all that, as Lisa Baraiter rightly points out.

My generation, trained by the poststructuralists in a hermeneutics of suspicion about the unitary subject of liberal political social and legal theory, struggled endlessly with a central paradox: how to combine incisive and lucid critique with the production of alternatives, criticism and creativity; reason and the imagination have been perennial concerns. In my own writing, this paradox was unfolded in a number of inter-related issues:

1. How to balance the creative potential of critical thought with the necessary dose of negative criticism and oppositional consciousness it entails?
2. How to resist the present, more specifically the violence of the times, while being worthy of our times, and hence engage actively with the present conditions?
3. How to expand the understanding of the political subject so as to create the optimal conditions to strive for the production of social horizons of hope, and hence for sustainable futures?
4. How to include the non-human, the animal and the planetary others in this enlarged understanding of political subjectivity today?

Let me state at the outset that there is nothing wilful or voluntaristic about this – I think rather the very historical condition of advanced global capitalism make is imperative to raise these questions. In books like *Transpositions*, I provide detailed and reasoned cartographies of our present historical condition in defence of this statement. It is not a matter of choosing to stick to the old humanistic and anthropocentric ways of thinking, but rather of being historically propelled into a situation in which we need to think differently about who we are in the process of becoming.

Moreover, the context we are operating in is saturated with its own negativity: from the environmental concerns and the multiple 'natural disasters' that punctuate our existence, to the state of perennial warfare we have entered since 2001 – which includes the militarization of the social space and of all border controls. Contemporary bio-political governance includes therefore a

hefty necro-political dimension, which fuels a political economy of negative passions in our social context. We live in a state of constant fear and in expectation of the imminent accident.

In this global context, what used to be the high-energy political activism of the Left has been replaced by collective mourning and melancholia. A great deal, if not most, of contemporary social and political theory stresses vulnerability, precarity and mortality. As far as I am concerned, our political sensibility has taken a forensic shift: the astounding success of Giorgio Agamben's 'bare life' (1998), with its emphasis on destitution and genocidal destruction and the revival of interest in Carl Schmitt's homicidal politics of friends and foes are strong expressions of the contemporary obsession with political violence, wounds, pain and suffering.

I do not want to suggest that the politics of mourning and the political economy of melancholia are intrinsically reactive or necessarily negative. A number of critical theorists argue forcefully the case for the productive nature of melancholia and its potential for creating solidarity (Butler, 2004; Gilroy, 2004). I am also convinced that melancholia expresses a form of loyalty through identification with the wound of others and hence that it promotes ecology of belonging by upholding the collective memory of trauma or pain. My argument is rather that the politics of melancholia has become so dominant in our culture that it ends up functioning like a self-fulfilling prophecy, which leaves very small margins for alternative approaches. I want to argue therefore for the need to experiment with other ethical relations as a way of producing an ethics of affirmation.

I want to take consequently a very different direction and argue the case for affirmation, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's neo-vitalism, but also indebted to Nietzsche and Spinoza (Ansell-Pearson, 1999). The focus in this line of thought is on the politics of life itself as a relentlessly generative force. The key terms in this affirmative politics are relations, endurance and radical immanence; the result is the notion of ethical sustainability. References to the non-human, inhuman or post-human play a very central role in this new ethical equation that rests on a fundamental dislocation of anthropocentric premises about agency.

Beyond Oppositional Negativity

Critical theory assumes political subjectivity to be about resistance, which is expected to mean the negation of the negativity of the present. Being against implies a belligerent act of negation of the present conditions: a double negative that engenders an affirmative. I want to argue instead that oppositional consciousness is not the same as negativity and that, as a consequence, critical theory is about strategies of affirmation. Nomadic

political subjectivity consists of multiple micro-political practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit, for ourselves and for future generations. As Adrienne Rich put it in her recent essays, the political activist has to think ‘in spite of the times’ and hence ‘out of my time’, thus creating the analytics – the conditions of possibility – of the future (Rich, 2001, p. 159). Critical theory occurs somewhere between the no longer and the not yet, not looking for easy reassurances in dualistic oppositions, but rather for evidence that others are struggling with the same questions. Consequently, we are in this together.

This shift of perspective assumes philosophical monism and a strong ethical and affective component of subjectivity; it is thus an anti-rationalist and anti-dualistic position. Conceptually, it borrows from Deleuze the idea that a subject’s ethical core is not his/her moral intentionality, as much as the effects of power (as repressive – *potestas* – and positive – *potentia*) his/her actions are likely to have upon the world. It is a process of engendering empowering modes of becoming (Deleuze, 1968). Given that in this neo-vitalist view the ethical good is equated with radical relationality aiming at affirmative empowerment, the ethical ideal is to increase one’s ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others. Oppositional consciousness and the political subjectivity or agency it engenders are processes or assemblages that actualize this ethical urge. This position is affirmative in the sense that it actively works towards the creation of alternatives by working actively through the negative instance by cultivating the relations that are conducive to the transmutation of values.

In other words, the work of critique must not assume that the conditions for the overturning of negativity are necessarily available in the present time or space. Moving beyond the dialectical scheme of thought means abandoning oppositional thinking. This means that oppositions are not tied to the present by negation and hence emerge out of a different set of premises, affects and conditions. Affirmative politics rests on a time-continuum that indexes the present on the possibility of thinking sustainable futures. The sustainability of these futures consists in their being able to mobilize, actualize and deploy cognitive, affective and collective forces that have not so far been activated. How to ethically assess and format these forces becomes a crucial issue for critical theory – in terms of an ethics of affirmation that is also an ethology of forces. These driving forces concretize in actual, material relations and can thus constitute a network, web or rhizome of interconnection with others.

Such a vision of the subject, therefore, does not restrict the ethical instance within the limits of human otherness, but also opens it up to inter-relations with non-human, post-human and inhuman forces. The emphasis on non-human ethical relations can also be described as a geo-politics or an eco-philosophy, in that it values one’s reliance on the environment in the broadest sense of the term. Considering the extent of our technological development,

emphasis on the ecology of belonging is a form of bio-centred egalitarianism (Ansell-Pearson, 1999) that posits a nature-culture continuum (Haraway, 1997) within which subjects cultivate and construct multiple ethical relations. The concepts of radical or neo-vital politics become very relevant here. According to this pragmatic ethical approach, we need to create the conditions for the emergence of affirmative relations, by cultivating relational ethics of becoming.

An affirmative ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or 'earth' others. This practice of relating to others requires and is enhanced by the rejection of self-centred individualism. It implies a new way of combining self-interests with the well-being of an enlarged sense of community, which includes one's territorial or inhuman, that is, environmental inter-connections. It is an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings for subjects constituted in and by multiplicity.

What is Affirmation?

In order to understand the kind of transmutation of values I am defending here, it is important to de-psychologize this discussion about negativity and affirmation, and approach it instead in more conceptual terms. What is positive in the ethics of affirmation is the belief that negative affects can be transformed. This is not a matter of faith, but of praxis or political conviction. It implies a dynamic view of all affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror or mourning. The slightly de-personalizing effect of the negative or traumatic event involves a loss of ego-indexed perception, which allows for energetic forms of reaction. Clinical psychological research on trauma testifies to this, but I cannot pursue this angle here today. Diasporic subjects of all kinds express the same insight. Multi-locality is the affirmative translation of this negative sense of loss. Following Glissant (1990), the becoming-nomadic marks the process of positive transformation of the pain of loss into the active production of multiple forms of belonging and complex allegiances. Every event contains within it the potential for being overcome and overtaken – its negative charge can be transposed. The moment of the actualization is also the moment of its neutralization. The ethical subject is the one with the ability to grasp the freedom to depersonalize the event and transform its negative charge. Affirmative ethics puts the motion back into e-motion and the active back into activism, introducing movement, process, becoming. This shift makes all the difference to the patterns of repetition of negative emotions. It also reopens the debate on secularity, in that it actually promotes an act of faith in our collective capacity to endure and to transform.

What is negative about negative affects is not a normative value judgement but rather the effect of arrest, blockage and rigidification, which comes as a result of a blow, a shock, an act of violence, betrayal, a trauma or just intense boredom. Negative passions do not merely destroy the self, but also harm the self's capacity to relate to others – both human and non-human others – and thus to grow in and through others. Negative affects diminish our capacity to express the high levels of inter-dependence, the vital reliance on others that is the key to both a non-unitary vision of the subject and to affirmative ethics. Again, the vitalist notion of Life as 'zoe' is important here because it stresses that the Life I inhabit is not mine, it does not bear my name – it is a generative force of becoming, of individuation and differentiation: a-personal, indifferent and generative.

What is negated by negative passions is the power of life itself – its *potentia* – as the dynamic force, vital flows of connections and becoming. And this is why they should neither be encouraged nor should we be rewarded for lingering around them too long. Negative passions are black holes. This position is an anti-thesis of the Kantian moral imperative to avoid pain, or to view pain as the obstacle to moral behaviour. This displaces the grounds on which Kantian negotiations of limits can take place. The imperative not to do unto others what you would not want done to you is not rejected as much as enlarged. In affirmative ethics, the harm you do to others is immediately reflected on the harm you do to yourself, in terms of loss of *potentia*, positivity, capacity to relate and, hence, freedom. Affirmative ethics is not about the avoidance of pain, but rather about transcending the resignation and passivity that ensue from being hurt, lost and dispossessed. One has to become ethical, as opposed to applying moral rules and protocols as a form of self-protection: one has to endure.

Endurance is the Spinozist code word for this process. Endurance has a spatial side to do with the space of the body as an enfolded field of actualization of passions or forces. It evolves affectivity and joy, as in the capacity for being affected by these forces, to the point of pain or extreme pleasure. Endurance points to the struggle to sustain the pain without being annihilated by it. Endurance has also a temporal dimension, about duration in time. This is linked to memory: intense pain, a wrong, a betrayal, a wound are hard to forget. The traumatic impact of painful events fixes them in a rigid eternal present tense, out of which it is difficult to emerge. This is the eternal return of that which precisely cannot be endured and, as such, returns precisely in the mode of the unwanted, the untimely, the un-assimilated or in-appropriate/d. They are also, however, paradoxically difficult to remember, insofar as re-membering entails retrieval and repetition of the pain itself.

Psychoanalysis, of course, has been here before (Laplanche, 1976). The notion of the return of the repressed is the key to the logic of unconscious remembrance, but it is a secret and somewhat invisible key that condenses space into the spasm of the symptom and time into a short circuit that mines the very

thinkability of the present. Kristeva's notion of the abject (1982) expresses clearly the temporality involved in psychoanalysis – by stressing the structural function played by the negative, by the incomprehensible, the un-thinkable, the other – of understandable knowledge. Later Kristeva (1991) describes this as a form of structural dissociation within the self that makes us strangers to ourselves.

Deleuze calls this alterity 'Chaos' and defines it positively as the virtual formation of all possible form. Lacan, on the other hand – and Derrida with him, I would argue – defines Chaos epistemologically as that which precedes form, structure and language. This makes for two radically divergent conceptions of time, and – more importantly for me today – of negativity. That which is incomprehensible for Lacan – following Hegel – is the virtual for Deleuze, following Spinoza, Bergson and Leibnitz. This produces a number of significant shifts: from negative to affirmative affects; from entropic to generative desire; from incomprehensible to virtual events to be actualized; from constitutive outsides to a geometry of affects that require mutual actualization and synchronization; from a melancholy and split to an open-ended web-like subject; from the epistemological to the ontological turn in poststructuralist philosophy.

Nietzsche has also been here before, of course. The eternal return in Nietzsche is the repetition, not in the compulsive mode of neurosis, nor in the negative erasure that marks the traumatic event. It is the eternal return of and as positivity. In a nomadic, Deleuzian-Nietzschean perspective, ethics is essentially about transformation of negative into positive passions, that is moving beyond the pain. This does not mean denying the pain, but rather activating it, working it through. Again, the positivity here is not supposed to indicate a facile optimism, or a careless dismissal of human suffering. It involves compassionate witnessing of the pain of others, as Zygmunt Bauman (1993) and Susan Sontag (2003) point out – in the mode of empathic co-presence.

Being Worthy of What Happens To Us

This de-linking of pain from suffering is not fatalism, and even less resignation, but rather a Nietzschean ethics of overturning the negative. Let us call it *amor fati*: we have to be worthy of what happens to us and rework it within an ethics of relation. Of course repugnant and unbearable events do happen. Ethics consists, however, in reworking these events in the direction of positive relations. It is not a matter of wilfulness, nor is it carelessness or lack of compassion, but rather a form of lucidity that acknowledges the meaninglessness of pain and the futility of compensation. It also re-asserts that the ethical instance is not that of retaliation or compensation, but it rather rests on active transformation of the negative.

What is an adequate ethical question? One that is capable of sustaining the subject in his/her quest for more inter-relations with others, that is more 'Life', motion, change and transformation. The adequate ethical question provides the subject with a frame for interaction and change, growth and movement. It affirms life as difference-at-work and as endurance. An ethical question has to be adequate in relation to how much a body can take. How much can an embodied entity take in the mode of inter-relations and connections, that is how much freedom of action can we endure? How much activity can be put into activism? Affirmative ethics assumes that humanity does not stem from freedom but rather that freedom is extracted out of the awareness of limitations. Affirmation is about freedom from the burden of negativity, it is about achieving freedom through the understanding of our bondage.

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