The Affective Turn in Political Theory

> Philosophers tend to give too much self-sufficiency to consciousness and to limit thinking too much to the discovery of knowledge. They therefore tend to confine themselves to that part of thinking in which logic pays its most active role. But consciousness is itself pre-organized and moved to some extent by modes of thinking below its reach. Without those processes consciousness would be flat; with them, it is less self-regulating or self-sufficient than intellectualists imagine.
>
> *– William Connolly*

> Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.
>
> *– Charles Péguy*

1.

The model that guides our understanding of the political subject is shifting. Most recently dubbed 'the affective turn' (Clough 2007), this shift marks the latest attempt to theoretically dislodge the view of man as primarily a logical decision-maker, an autonomous and objective political agent who weighs means and ends coolly and impassionedly. The image of man as "omniscient calculator" (Lupia et al.), an image that has shaded political theory at least since Plato's *Republic*, and that has, in more recent time, dominated the intellectual landscape of the Enlightenment, is now being challenged by a notion of an embodied, emotional and affected political agent. What is taking hold of the political imaginary is a rehabilitated and non-apologetic notion of a more-than-rational political subject no less motivated by emotion than by reason, whose cognition is embodied and not abstracted, and who inhabits an environment saturated by intensities and creative energies that signal new and exciting ways to rethink, and perhaps even reconfigure the political field. At stake are our theoretical and practical understandings of the relations of logic and reason, mind and body, and thought and action, but also, the very way we conceive the horizons under which meaningful political action may take place.

My aim in this comprehensive exam is to trace the ways in which the challenging of the rational human model in the cognitive sciences, psychology and philosophy is reflected in strands of contemporary political theory. When doing so, however, I am mindful of a second vector of change, namely the broadening of the political field itself. In this mode, the domain of political theory in effect converges with that of social or cultural theory, but foregrounds those social relations that partake in the dynamics and

distribution of power and which include (but are not limited to) issues of representation, governance and resource allocation.

The material for the exam comprises three interrelated clusters of literature. Each cluster is organized around a different challenge to the rational human model, and indicates a different strategic response within political theory to the emergence of a more-than-rational subject. Taken together, the three clusters provide a multidimensional (but not a holistic or even a synthesizable!) view of the affective turn and a basis for its critique. The first cluster focuses on the challenge cognitive science's notion of the embodied mind poses to strands of political science that are centered on institutional processes and mechanisms. In this genre of political theory, the model of the political subject as primarily embodied and emotional had to be overcome or worked through in order to salvage the ideal that is liberal deliberative democracy. The second cluster centres on the exploitation of the image of a more-than-rational man in twentieth-century discourses of commercial and political persuasion. Here, the image of humans as irrational decision-makers was adopted and embedded in a view of commercial decision-making as an expression of political agency. The third and last cluster focuses on attempts to employ the philosophical articulation of affect as a platform to progressively reconfigure the politico-cultural field. Here, the manner in which humans relate to affect is considered a marker of deep-seated (existential?) change and potential transformation.

2.

Recent discoveries made by cognitive scientists have triggered a real paradigm shift – a "cognitivist revolution" that prompted changes in the models and methodologies of political science (Beniger & Dusek 1995). The development of new brain scanning technologies and the interdisciplinary fusing of neurological, linguistic and psychological approaches enabled cognitive science to posit anew the links between mind and body, cognition and behaviour. These were most famously concretized under 'the embodied mind' thesis, whose main tenets are: thought is inherently embodied, that is, "The same neural and cognitive mechanisms that allow us to perceive and move around also create our conceptual systems and modes of reason" (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 4); emotions and feelings are indispensable for rational thought (Damasio 1994); and cognitive processes are emergent, distributed and elastic (Varela et al. 1993). Taken together,

these recent discoveries have displaced the older, mentalist model of the 'computational mind' which viewed cognition as a sequential processing of informational units – a model inherited from first wave cybernetics in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Dupuy 2000; Hayles 1999; Varela et al. 1993). As the body entered the inner sanctum of thought, Descartes' (1637) dichotomization of mind from body and thought from matter was no longer tenable, leaving the humanism that floated the liberal subject itself groundless (Hayles 1999; Varela et al. 1993; Lupia et al. 2000). Furthermore, the theoretical premise of liberalism, it seems, may not have been the only casualty of the embodied mind as the introduction of an emotional and embodied political agent into existing frameworks of participatory democracy has led to a thorough re-examination of the dynamics and utility of deliberative democratic processes (Kuklinski & Quirk 2000; Mackuen et al. 2007).

3.

Of course, the discovery that many of our thought processes take place beneath the threshold of consciousness is not the exclusive product of late twentieth century cognitive science. In Freud's (1915; 1922; 1923) formulation of the unconsciousness and the id as repositories of repressed drives and latent desires that nonetheless shape human behaviour, the self-image of humanity as it was forged in the Enlightenment has already suffered a critical blow – a "narcissistic wound" as Freud put it himself.

The image Freud illustrated of humans driven to act in certain ways without realizing the sources of their motivations is antithetical to the Cartesian subject who finds certainty in his own self-reflexion, and it was a boon to those seeking a 'science of persuasion': marketers and politicians now had a theoretical *and* empirical framework with which they could attempt to circumvent logic and appeal directly to its tributaries. Thus, for marketers Freud's theory enabled a more effective (i.e., empirically valid) crafting of a "consumer consciousness" (Ewen 2001), to be achieved by tapping into latent desires and by manipulating the innermost mechanisms of identity construction (Dawson 2003; Pope 1983). And although Freudian psychoanalysis is no longer operationalized en masse – itself victim to the oscillatory nature of marketing paradigms (Curti 1967) – its modeling of unconscious behavioural motivations still orients marketers, even as they rapidly move to incorporate the insights of cognitive science into a science of marketing – "buyology" in Lindstrom's (2008) terms. In this vein, even with the application of strategic sensorial stimulation (Rushkoff 1999), the exploitation of the

relations between peripheral vision, repetition and involuntary memory (Krugman 1977), and the taking advantage of the latent metaphors that shape our perception of products (Rapaille 2006), marketing remains committed to revealing and manipulating "the subconscious thoughts, feelings, and desires that drive the purchasing decisions we make each and every day of our lives" (Lindstrom 2008: 3).

The upshot of Freud's theory of the unconscious, an image of man torn by a set of tensions between autonomy and determinism, awareness and latency, logic and impulse (Fromm 1970; MacIntyre 1958), was significant to the way the political subject was perceived in North America. Here, the rise of fascism, the horrific events of the Second World War and the rise of an all-embracing consumer culture in the 1950s seemed to confirm Lippmann's (1922) fundamental distrust of the capacity of citizens in mass democracies to make informed (i.e., logical and impassioned) decisions in the political field (see also Packard 1957). Yet, as Duncombe's (2007) notion of 'ethical spectacle' demonstrates, the very same elements used to paint a picture of an irrational man drifting on a sea of propaganda and spectacle can serve to reconfigure progressive politics. The task of reconfiguration and its conditions of possibility are the subject of the third and last cluster.

4.

While Freud's postulation of the unconscious remains largely committed to the Cartesian, mentalist foundations of the Enlightenment's humanism (Fromm 1970), the theorists explored in this section draw from a different source, Baruch Spinoza's (1677) articulation of affect as it was interpreted by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1978; with Guattari 2004). Although affect is defined in rather nebulous ways and, as such, is prone to conceptual misapplications and terminological slippage (Massumi 2002; Seigworth 2005; see also Hemmings (2005) for a view of affect as a rhetorical device), it is largely conceived and applied as a way to encode the relations of bodies, movement and force in a conceptual terminology unmarred by the dichotomous matrix of Cartesianism.

In a nutshell, affect references the change and variations that take place when bodies come into contact under two interrelated aspects: first, corresponding to Spinoza's "affectio" and invoked by Deleuze as "affection", it indexes the transitive effect

that bodies experience in the presence of other bodies (Seigworth 2005), a sort of force-field in which the "mixing of bodies" results in felt intensities. Second, corresponding to Spinoza's "affectus" and Deleuze's "affect", it denotes a "kind of melodic line of continuous variation" (Deleuze 1978: 4) that conditions the capacity of bodies to act. In this mode, affect is akin to our unconscious monitoring of our own bodily states, what Damasio (1994) calls "background feelings" and what we can think of as the felt 'murmur of life'. It is from the latter aspect, and under the influence of Bergson (2007), that Deleuze associates affect with the continuous actualization of the "virtual", a marker of unceasing emergence, of "becoming other". In this mode, affect discloses the body's relation to its (real but abstract) potentialities, revealing the body as a centre of indeterminacy and incipience that precede – in fact, are a prerequisite for – its binding by socio-cultural qualifications (such as language or semiosis).

Unformed, unstructured and unbound, the theorization of affect allows for a material understanding of the co-emergence of the political subject and the politico-cultural field, its formations and vectors (Grossberg 1992; Massumi 2002). It also serves to immanently challenge capitalism's subordination of "naked life" (Agamben 1996; see also Foucault's (2004) notion of "biopower") to the logic of equivalence in the form of "affective labour" (Hardt 1999; Negri 1999). And in its resonance with visceral intensities and relations with ideologically deployed "mattering maps" (Grossberg 1992), affect can help explain our investment of creative energies into (or engagement with) certain political activities, and indicate ways by which these energies could be re-channeled into progressive politics (Connolly 2002).

5.

Some cross-cluster themes and questions I will be thinking about:

--Continuity or rupture: In what ways can the affective turn be conceived as a real rupture from the model it precedes, and in what ways can it be seen to merely continue it? In this vein, does it represent anti-humanism, a "return of the repressed", or perhaps humanism 'continued by other means'?

--Autonomy and determinism: Seen against the background of 'really existing' politics, does the affective turn signal an 'end to human autonomy' – or does it merely strike a new balance between autonomy and (several types of) determinism?

--The role of the social: How are the relations between the social (considered expansively) and the individual agent articulated within the affective turn? What are the implications for politics understood as that dynamic space which mediates individuals and social forces?

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