

Comprehensive Exam for Roy Bendor
February 15, 2009

Please answer two of the following questions. Your answers should be approximately 2,500 words and are due in 3 days (i.e. by 9am on February 18, 2009), submitted electronically to your committee, with a copy also to be sent to Denise Vanderwolf, the Graduate Coordinator.

1. In your essay you suggest that the affective turn “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” (1, emphasis added). Yet some might argue that this turn actually renovates and expands the grounds for human autonomy rather than displacing or minimizing them. Insofar as emotion and/or affect are recruited as key dimensions of the cognitive processes through which humans interact with their environment and determine what is in their best interests, the potential for autonomous activity expands beyond consciousness *per se* to a broader range of embodied action. No longer conceived as impediments to autonomy, reason and critical reflexivity, emotion and affect become essential to their exercise. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
2. In the first cluster of literature you identify (and, to some extent, in the third cluster as well), affect is (re)positioned as both enabling and, in many cases, strengthening the human capacity to reason and act in a critical and effective manner. The second cluster of literature, however, provides a more cautious and even cynical rendering in which the stimulation of affect tends to produce a bypassing or suppression of the faculties of critical reason. Assess the compatibility (or incompatibility) of these clusters of literature in terms of how they theorize the normative role of affect vis-a-vis political empowerment *and* disempowerment.
3. The conceptual expansion of the political, which you identify as a core dimension of the affective turn, has accompanied critical social and political thought of all kinds from Marxism and feminism to post-structuralism and post-colonialism. But one might also argue that this theoretical inflation – up to the point where virtually every element of our social world is ‘political’ in some form or other – has fundamentally weakened or devalued our understanding of the specificity of the political. Considering at least two of the three clusters you identify, provide a comparative discussion and assessment of how they help us understand “the dynamics and distribution of power” (p. 1) in such a way that the political retains its utility as a critical analytic concept. What is the relationship between affect and politics? Are all manifestations of affect political? Are all politics affective? Why or why not?
4. Describing the third cluster of literature which has arisen around the work of Deleuze, you note that affect is “defined in rather nebulous ways and, as such, is prone to conceptual misapplications and terminological slippage” (p. 4). Can you expand on this critical observation and discuss what you believe to be the principal ‘conceptual misapplications’ and ‘terminological slippage’ in the literature on affect as well as your thoughts on how these deficiencies might be remedied? Does this critique apply to all of the contemporary literature on affect or primarily to that inspired by Deleuze? Is it necessary, for example, to translate definitions of affect as “a force-field in which the ‘mixing of bodies’ results in felt intensities” or “a kind of melodic line of continuous variation” (p. 4) into a vocabulary which is both more precise and more political? How might this be done? Or is this kind of conceptual indeterminacy and ambiguity required to theorize affect as a form of unstructured, virtual potentiality which necessarily escapes more conventional forms of discursive representation?