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# Political affects in public space: normative blind-spots in non-representational ontologies

Clive Barnett

Recent theoretical debates in human geography have been characterised by a preference for ontological styles of argument. The ontologisation of theory is associated with distinctive claims about rethinking 'the political'. This paper draws on an avowedly 'non-representationalist' philosophical perspective to develop an interpretation of ontology-talk as a genre that provides reasons for certain commitments. This argument is developed with reference to recent accounts of the spatial politics of affect in cultural geography and urban studies, and of the neuropolitics of media affects in political theory. The commitments that the ontology of affect provides reasons for are shown to revolve around understandings of the value of democracy. Assertions of the political relevance of ontologies of affect rhetorically appeal to norms that are not explicitly avowed from these theoretical perspectives. The ontologisation of affect depends on a particular settlement of the priority-claims of different families of concepts. The combination of an ontological style of theoretical analysis and an imperative to claim relevance for affective aspects of life in terms of rethinking 'the political' leads to a presentation of affect as an effective modality of manipulation mediated by infrastructures of public space. The ontological presentation of affect therefore forecloses on a series of normative questions provoked by the acknowledgement of the affective aspects of life. While the value of democracy is thrown into new relief by affect onto-stories, the full implications of any likely reconfiguration of our understandings of democracy remain to be elaborated in this line of thought, not least because it avoids any engagement with the principle of participation by all affected interests.

**key words** affect democracy media ontology public space

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## Introduction

Human geography has recently seen a flourishing of research on 'affect'. This is part of a broader movement of developing 'non-representational' ontologies. Advocates of 'non-representational' approaches have offered assertive statements of the relevance of this style of analysis for understanding what counts as 'the political' (e.g. Amin and Thrift 2002 2005). This in turn has generated a highly charged debate over whether these

approaches measure up to preferred criteria of political seriousness (e.g. Smith 2005; Amin and Thrift 2007).

This paper does not ask whether 'non-representational' approaches in general are political enough, or whether they are political in the right way. It focuses instead on ontologies of affect, and identifies a specific normative blind-spot that emerges when adherents of these ontologies surrender to the urgent demand to come clean about the 'political' salience of this perspective.

The argument proceeds in three stages.

First, the next section elaborates an avowedly 'non-representationalist' interpretation of ontological vocabularies that informs the critical argument developed in the rest of the paper. There are different possible interpretations of the widespread acknowledgement of the dependence of propositional intentionality on a background of practical attunements to situated environments (see Haugeland 1998). It is argued that the ontologisation of affect reduces embodied knowing to the dimension of mute attunement and coping with environments. This elides the aspect of embodied knowing that involves the capacity to take part in 'games of giving and asking for reasons'.

Second, the tendency for ontologies of affect to answer the demand for politics through recourse to the trope of manipulation is explored, with reference to two key theorists of this approach: the work of Nigel Thrift on the spatial politics of affect and William Connolly's theorisation of the cultural politics of neurologically transmitted media affects. Thrift's work has explicitly set out to invent a field of 'non-representational theory' in which affect is ascribed considerable significance as both an object of analysis and as a theoretical orientation. Connolly's work has provided resources for articulating an ontology of affect with a programme of political analysis that directly addresses issues in normative democratic theory. The third and fourth sections of the paper focus on these two related fields of social science, in which ontologies of affect have been presented as carrying political weight by virtue of the light they throw on the ways in which power circulates in public space. Thrift's spatial politics of affect and Connolly's neuropolitics of affect converge around a particular construal of affect as a means of manipulating political subjects without them knowing it. The trope of manipulation occurs in the *critical account of the politics of affect* that one finds in these ontologies. Understanding affect is a pressing political task, it is argued, because 'the systematic manipulation of "motivational propensities" has become a key political technology' (Thrift 2007, 26). The same trope of manipulation troubles the efforts of Thrift and Connolly to outline an *affirmative account of the politics of affect*, in which progressive politics is presented as various tactical experiments on the dispositions of dispersed publics.

Third, the combination of a rhetoric of manipulation with a strong ontological claim about the conceptual priority of affective registers over deliberative ones

is seen to generate a normative blind spot in these political ontologies of affect. This is discussed in the fifth section. In trying to square an affirmative account of the politics of affect with a critical account of the politics of affect, political ontologies of affect implicitly avow normative values that the theoretical resources they mobilise appear to undermine. This is most evident in the oblique reference to the value of democracy in these accounts. By identifying how the ontology of affect is translated into a genre of democratic ethos which is presented as preferable to alternative theories of democratic pluralism, the enactment of this ontology is thrown into new perspective as being offered as a *reason* for certain *commitments*. And in so far as it stands as the reason for such commitments, adherents to this ontology are exposed to being called on to give further reasons to justify these commitments.

The conclusion spells out two sets of questions around which turn judgements of claims about 'the politics of affect'.

### Arguing with theory

The ascendancy of an ontological register of theoretical argument in contemporary human geography is indicated by the abstract delimitation of the 'the cultural' from 'the economic', the 'discursive' from the 'material', 'being' from 'becoming', 'the human' from 'the non-human', the 'representational' from the 'non-representational', the 'rational' from the 'more-than-rational'. Getting your ontology right, which usually means avowing that one holds to a 'relational ontology', has become the benchmark of theoretical probity. The ascendancy of this sort of ontological register reflects a move to *philosophise* social science (Kivinen and Piironen 2006). It is supposed that inquiry can and must be preceded by clearly delimiting the general metaphysical properties possessed by objects of analysis.

The ontologisation of theory in human geography marks a distinctive inflection of a broad array of post-foundationalist philosophies. Post-foundational philosophies hold that the world of human affairs is not only held together by relationships of knowledge, and where it is, knowledge is not a matter of certainty (e.g. Cavell 1979; Taylor 1995). They promise to deflate approaches that prioritise the epistemological aspects of action, and which assume that non-cognitive grounds of action and belief are suspect. The resurgent theme of affect in the social sciences and the humanities is illustrative of this

post-foundational deflation of overly cognitivist models of action.

The ontologisation of theory has been associated with a strong preference for models of ethical and political agency that focus attention upon embodied, affective dispositions of subjects. This reflects the influence of various theoretical and philosophical traditions that share a deep suspicion of 'cognitivist', 'intellectualist' or 'mentalist' construals of human action. This follows from a widely shared intuition that propositional 'knowing-that' is a function of embodied 'knowing-how'. Once it is acknowledged that 'knowing-how' involves all sorts of learned, embodied dispositions that are inscribed in various types of 'unconscious' disposition of anticipation and response, then theoretical traditions that are too partial to a picture of a social world governed by rules, principles and practices of reason seem constricted or even wrong-headed.

Consistent with the ontological drift of certain strands of cultural theory and 'Continental philosophy' (Hemmings 2005; White 2000), in human geography affect has become the sort of thing one can have 'a theory of', where this amounts to the correct delimitation of the ontological status of affective forces (e.g. Anderson B 2006; Anderson and Harrison 2006; McCormack 2007). Thrift (2004a, 464; 2007, 223–35) identifies a family of research fields concerned with affect: cultural-theoretic work on performance; Sylvan Tomkins' seminal work on affect; Deleuze's reading of Spinoza; and Darwinian accounts. Psychoanalysis is also acknowledged as a source, somewhat reluctantly. So-called 'non-representational theory' (Thrift 2007) derives a highly abstract definition of affect from this range of work. Affect is presented as an ontological layer of embodied existence, delimited by reference to the purely formal relationship of the capacity *to be affected* and *to affect*. In this presentation, affect is doubly located: in the relational in-between of fields of interaction; and layered below the level of minded, intentional consciousness. This vocabulary of the 'layering' of thinking, feeling and judgement is fundamental to the political resonances claimed on behalf of ontologies of affect.

In principle, post-foundational philosophies which acknowledge that practical reasoning goes on against a background of affective dispositions and desires could be expected to reconfigure what, following Ryle (1949, 10), we might call 'the logical geography' of action. However, when the post-foundationalist avowal of the importance of embodied 'knowing-how' is interpreted in terms of 'layer-cake'

ontologies of practice, there is a tendency to simply assert the conceptual priority of previously denigrated terms – affect over reason, practice over representation. Disputes over the significance for social science of post-foundationalist philosophy turn on the types of priority-claim that are assumed to follow from ontological assertions that ready-at-handedness, background or affective attunement stand as the background to embodied action.

The ontologisation of affect in recent cultural theory is associated with the explicit adoption of a layer-cake interpretation of the relationship between practice and expression. Layer-cake interpretations present propositional intentionality as resting upon a more basic level of pre-conceptual, practical intentionality in such a way as to present propositional intentionality as derivative of this layer of practical attunement (Brandom 2002, 328). On this view, the practical presupposition of the available, ready-at-hand qualities of environments in embodied actions that treat these environments as merely occurrent, or present-at-hand, is interpreted as implying an order of *conceptual priority* of the practical (Brandom 2002, 332). This model of conceptual priority puts in place a view of practical attunement as a stratum that is autonomous of propositional intentionality. It is treated as a layer that 'could be in place before, or otherwise in the absence of the particular linguistic practices that permit anything to show up or be represented as merely *there*' (Brandom 2002, 80). This view of practice as an autonomous layer therefore reproduces a representationalist view of representational practices in order to assert the superiority of an avowedly 'non-representational' stance.

In contrast to this view, we might instead suppose that the priority of practice only holds in *the order of explanation* (Brandom 2002, 332). This implies that we cannot understand propositional intentionality without first understanding its dependence on practice, without supposing that this requires an understanding of practice as an intentional layer that kicks-in before others. It means presuming that the capacity to represent things as being a certain way is

the result of applying an assertional-inferential filter to things available to us in the first instance as exhibiting various sorts of practical significance. (Brandom 2002, 80)

This alternative interpretation does not assert the priority of one 'layer' over another. Rather, it reconfigures our understanding of what we are

*doing* when representational discourse breaks out, when we say 'that things are thus-and-so' (Brandom 2002, 80). Rejecting the layer-cake interpretation of the type of priority that practice is said to have over propositional intentionality leads to a reconfiguration of the pragmatics of expressive rationality. Rather than supposing that acts of expression are ways of transforming an inner content into an outer expression, in a representational way, we instead think in terms of acts of making explicit what is implicit, in an *inferential* way (Brandom 2001, 8). An interpretation in terms of the explanatory priority of practice therefore allows us to understand in inferential terms the embodied capacity for making explicit something one can *do* as something one can *say*. This is a capacity to translate 'knowing how' into a 'knowing that' which is expressed in terms of *commitments* and *entitlements*, 'as putting it in a form in which it can both serve as and stand in need of reasons' (Brandom 2001, 11). The sense of 'implicit' in this holistic-inferential account does not presume that the reasons that can be made explicit were present as the maxims behind the actions to which they are retroactively attributed. It just means there is no sharp line between unarticulated know-how and explicit knowledge (Taylor 2000); and that the latter should be thought of as providing a step towards acknowledging the responsibilities entailed in actions.

This interpretation of the order of priority that holds between different sorts of intentionality opens up the possibility of reconfiguring the logical geography of action. It supposes that different modalities of action enact their own 'validity conditions' that can, in principle, be made explicit in public practices of giving and asking for reasons (e.g. Bridge 2007; Flyvbjerg 2001; Lovibond 2002). This reconsideration of the pragmatics of expressive rationality reconfigures understandings of deliberation that underlie theories of democracy, justice and legitimacy (see Habermas 2000; Brandom 2000). This overlaps with attempts to develop thoroughgoing accounts of affective deliberation in contemporary democratic theory (e.g. Krause 2007; Hoggett and Thompson 2002). This work makes explicit the relevance of affective aspects of life for deliberative models of democracy that work up from the principle of affected interest, according to which those affected by actions and outcomes should have some say in defining the parameters of those actions and outcomes.

The upsurge of interest in the theme of affect speaks in compelling ways to a recurrent problem

in democratic theory: how to respect citizens as competent moral agents whilst acknowledging the web of dependent, conditioned relationships into which they are thrown. There is an extensive literature in political science on the role that non-rational sentiments, feelings and emotions play in the political decisionmaking processes. This is a literature which is empirically grounded (e.g. Marcus 2002), and explicitly reconfigures understandings of the relationships between rationality, reason and action (e.g. McDermott 2004). The degree to which affective capabilities can be articulated with public procedures of democratic legitimacy is a central problem in post-Habermasian critical theory's project of describing the conditions of radical democratic, pluralistic constitutionalism (e.g. Habermas 2006; Honneth 2007; Markell 2000). Berlant's (2005a) historiography of affective publics in American culture establishes that any and all political public spheres are shaped by affective energies, while Sedgwick (2003) and Riley (2005) have explored the affective dynamics of textual practices. In moral philosophy, affect is embraced as a means of rethinking the role of partiality in deliberative practices, for example in Baier's (1994) feminist ethics of moral prejudice which roots reason in affects, or in Blackburn's (1998) Humean reconstruction of practical reason. The key thought guiding these reconfigurations of affect-with-reason is the idea that rationality emerges out of situated encounters with others. This same theme underwrites the work of political theorists reconfiguring democratic theory around an appreciation of the affective registers of justice and injustice, expressed in an emphasis on the arts of receptivity, of listening and acknowledging and responding (e.g. Young 1997; Coles 2005).

Thrift's spatial politics of affect and Connolly's neuropolitics of media affects sits, therefore, in a much broader range of work that is concerned with affective aspects of political life. But the examples noted above all focus on the affective aspects of life *without* adopting a vocabulary of ontological layers, levels and priority. This is in contrast to the characteristic ontologisation of affect in human geography. The ontologisation of affect as a layer of pre-conscious 'priming to act' reduces embodied action simply to the dimension of being attuned to and coping with the world. This elides the aspect of embodied knowing that involves the capacity to take part in 'games of giving and asking for reasons'. While the ontologisation of theory in human geography has been accompanied by claims to

transform and reconfigure understandings of what counts as 'the political', this project has been articulated in a register which eschews the conventions of justification, that is, the giving and asking for reasons. This is particularly evident when it comes to accounting for why the contemporary deployment of affective energy in the public realm is bad for democracy. The contemporary deployment of anxious, obsessive and compulsive affect in the political realm is presented as having 'deleterious consequences' on the grounds that it works against democratic expression (Thrift 2007, 253); contributes to a style of democracy that is consumed but not practised (2007, 248); promotes forms of sporadic engagement that can be switched on and off (2007, 240); and generally leads to certain dispositions being placed beyond question. There is certainly a vision of democracy as a particular type of engaged ethical practice at work in these occasional judgements (2007, 14), but the precise normative force of this view is not justified in any detail.

The eschewing of justification arises in part because the *content* of these ontologies, which emphasise various layers of knowing that kick-in prior to representation, is projected directly onto the *form* of exposition. There is a particular type of authority put into play in this move. The avowedly anti-intentionalist materialism associated with contemporary cultural-theoretic ontologies of affect closes down the conceptual space in which argument and disagreement can even get off the ground (see Leys 2007). In contrast, and as outlined above, the argument pursued here follows an avowedly 'non-representationalist' perspective according to which assertions of knowledge, including the types of knowledge asserted by ontologies of affect, always stand in need of reasons, precisely because they emerge as reasons for certain sorts of *commitments* and *entitlements* (Brandom 1996, 167). On this understanding ontological assertions act as justifications, and are subject to the demand for justification. If 'placing things in the space of reasons' (McDowell 1994, 5) in this sense is not acknowledged as one aspect of practice, then recourse to the ontological register closes down the inconclusive conversations upon which democratic cultural politics depends (Rorty 2006).

This paper therefore addresses two aspects of the logical geography of political ontologies of affect. First, attention is paid to the layer-cake model of the relationship between 'doing' and 'knowing' which underwrites the claims about the

political salience of ontologies of affect. This is the focus of the following two sections on 'Affective mediations of power'. Second, this is related to the foreclosure by these ontologies of the space for the giving of and asking for reasons, understood as both an ordinary aspect of practical conduct and a conventional virtue of academic argument. This is the focus of the section 'Affecting politics'.

### **Affective mediations of power I: manipulating infrastructures of feeling**

In human geography and urban studies, the clearest articulation of the political relevance of ontologies that theorise agency in terms of affect is provided by Nigel Thrift (see 2004a 2006 2007). This section identifies a recurrent trope of manipulation which underwrites claims that ontologies of affect rethink 'the political'. Thrift's argument builds on and contributes to recent work on the phenomenology of everyday urban life which has drawn attention to how the design of spaces can effectively background and habituate a set of preferences and pathways of action and interaction (e.g. Allen 2006; Bridge 2005; French and Thrift 2002; Latham and McCormack 2004; Laurier and Philo 2006). In this research, urban space emerges as a medium for the inculcation of various hateful, hopeful, desirous or respectful dispositions.

For Thrift, the lesson drawn from this sort of research is a heightened awareness of the extent to which 'affective response can be designed into spaces' (Thrift 2004b, 68). Knowledge of affect, marshalled by firms, planners, architects and other actors, provides 'a new minute landscape of manipulation' (2004b, 66). Thrift argues that knowledge of the workings of affect has become increasingly important to the way in which urban capitalism reproduces and reinvents itself (Thrift 2004e 2005c):

whereas affect has always, of course, been a constant of urban experience, now affect is more and more likely to be actively engineered with the result that it is becoming something more akin to the networks of pipes and cables that are of such importance in providing the basic mechanics and root textures of urban life. (Thrift 2004b, 58)

These affective infrastructures are enacted through various 'lively devices', such as software, proliferating performative spaces of the screen, and various calculative technologies (Thrift 2004a 2004c 2005b).

Together, these help constitute the 'technological unconscious' of contemporary urban living (Thrift 2004d), or more pertinently to the argument here, the 'technological anteconscious' (Thrift 2007, 10).

Thrift has therefore developed a body of work which makes a concerted effort to outline what an affective politics might consist of. It reorders our sense of just how deeply embedded harm, inequality and injustice are in fabric of everyday life (Thrift 2005a). And it challenges our understandings of just what shape effective political agency might take in the wake of this acknowledgement (see Graham and Thrift 2007).

When it comes to expounding on why affect matters politically, Thrift's argument is that we should take affect seriously because it amounts to a whole new surface for the exercise of power, through the 'tendency towards the greater and greater engineering of affect' (2004b, 64). This argument starts off with a neutral sounding observation:

systematic knowledges of the creation and mobilisation of affect have become an integral part of the everyday urban landscape: affect has become part of a reflexive loop which allows more and more sophisticated interventions in various registers of urban life. (2004b, 58)

From this, we are quickly moved onto a stronger sense of the powers of affect:

these knowledges are not only being deployed knowingly, they are being deployed politically (usually but not only by the rich and powerful) to political ends: what might have been painted an aesthetic is increasingly instrumental. (2004b, 58)

Affect, it turns out, is now engineered as a whole infrastructure of feeling that is deployed instrumentally for the pursuit of expanded commodification. If this is not worrying enough, then the same affective technologies that have been developed to modulate the action of consumers 'are now being moved over into the political sphere with mainly deleterious consequences' (Thrift 2007, 26). The political stake in understanding affect therefore lies in better understanding the dynamics of various affective technologies 'through which masses of people become primed to act' (2007, 26).

Thrift's rendition of the spatial politics of affect adopts a particular rhetorical register through which a vision of 'the political' is deduced from this account of contemporary urban infrastructures of feeling. Affect is consistently presented as a medium of *manipulation*:

the discovery of new means of practicing affect is also the discovery of a whole new means of manipulation by the powerful. (Thrift 2004b, 58)

Modern urban capitalism is increasingly driven by the 'the manipulation of affect'. In turn, this management of affect is undertaken instrumentally and strategically – that is, not communicatively, to lapse into a Habermasian distinction for a moment. It is not routed through the representational circuitry of minded, intentional consciousness. These days, it turns out, 'the rich and powerful' reproduce their privilege by getting at people not at the level of what they think or what they recognise, but more directly at the level of what they feel.

Thrift articulates the relevance of an ontology of affect for political theory by arguing that it draws into view new forms of what he calls the 'politics of credence' (Thrift 2006). The rhetoric of manipulation is deployed to assert both the political relevance of affect, and to assert the heightened importance of space as a surface for pursuing this type of strategy. New forms of the politics of credence 'rely on the manipulation of the micro-fabric of space and time in order to maximize an affective bounty' (Thrift 2006, 548). If affect is 'intimately connected with the political and the exercise of politics', then in turn, 'generating affect relies on manipulating space' (2006, 557). Space is involved in every point of the generation of affect. This argument concerning the affective instrumentalisation of space, understood as a kind of 'force field of effects' (Bridge 2007), is bolstered by recourse to an instrumentalist rhetoric of 'the flurries of anxiety' which are 'let loose' by the media and the 'waves of anger and rage' which are 'marshalled and directed' by armies.

'The media' are the exemplary technologies that Thrift alights upon in accounting for the affective reproduction of authoritarian capitalism and sham democracy (Thrift 2007, 235–54). 'The media' are presented as the model for understanding the process of 'affective contagion', the way in which affects are spread through the more or less instrumental modulation of dispositions of imitation and suggestibility (2007, 235). In Thrift's account of contemporary Western democratic cultures, the selective engineering of anxiety, obsession and compulsion (2007, 240) for political ends is carried off through the generalised 'mediation of society' (2007, 245). A specific ontological claim is invoked in this analysis: affect is located in the 'the half-second delay between action and cognition' (2007,

243). This general condition of proprioception is given a specifically political inflection in Thrift's political diagnosis of the contemporary conjuncture. This temporal gap is the space in which bare life itself is susceptible to manipulation by 'dark forces' in an increasingly mediated world. It is in this interval that various feelings can be 'pre-treated' so that what appear to be volitional, wilful actions, beliefs or thoughts turn out to be already primed dispositions. Just what it is that make 'the media' quite so effective as instruments for the circulation of affect is never quite specified in Thrift's account, beyond the sense that the proliferation of media multiplies the points for applying affective technologies to 'inherently susceptible, receptive, exposed' bodies (2007, 239). The next section considers how the sense that 'the media' now constitute the space of politically motivated affective contagion is inflected in the account of degenerate democracy developed by the political theorist William Connolly.

### **Affective mediations of power II: the neuropolitics of media affects**

An important reference point for spatial ontologies of affect is the recent work of William Connolly (2002b) on neuropolitics. It serves as an authoritative reference point in Thrift's spatial politics of affect, in Gibson-Graham's (2006) vision of the counter-hegemonic politics of affective subjectivity, and in work on the geopolitics of affect (e.g. Carter and McCormack 2006; O'Tuathail 2003). Just as Thrift's politics of affect constructs urban public space and 'the media' as a privileged scene of affective manipulation, so Connolly's account of the neuropolitics of affect relies on a particular account of the public circulation of affect. Connolly combines a strong ontology of affects, a borrowed account of neurological firing, and Deleuzian film theory to develop a fully blown political ontology of publicly circulated media affects. Connolly's affirmative account of the politics of affect explicitly addresses key aspects of normative democratic theory. It informs an account of democratic pluralism that is presented as an alternative to theories of democratic deliberation indebted to political philosophers such as John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas.

Connolly's account of the politics of affect stakes a great deal on a claim about the priority of 'know-how' over 'propositional knowledge' in the 'layering' together of mind-body-culture (Connolly 2002b,

92). Connolly (2002b, 83), like Thrift, invests great weight in neurophysiological research on the 'half-second delay' between the reception of sensory data and the conscious interpretation of it. The idea that certain actions precede the feelings that are retrospectively presented as their causes is generalised by Connolly to all forms of perception and judgement. There is a strong affinity here with Thrift's precise placement of affect in this temporal gap. The view that it is 'in those small spaces of time between action and cognition' that affect does its work underwrites a 'layer-cake' model of politics understood as varied efforts to intervene in the visceral registers located in this temporal interval (Thrift 2006, 560–1). It is in 'the small space of time between action and cognition' (Thrift 2007, 24) that corporations and political actors experiment with the background conditions of bare life. Connolly's work on the politics of affect assumes that this gap implies an order of conceptual priority. In his account of the 'layering of body/brain/culture', the visceral register of affect is understood to work below the level of and prior to deliberative argument. This claim of layering and priority is significant for understanding why the challenge Connolly presents to Rawlsian and Habermasian accounts of democratic culture takes the form of a picture of democratic pluralism as an *ethos* rather than a set of rationalising procedures.

Connolly provides a compelling account of the political salience of an ontology of affect. This builds on his conceptualisation of the relationship between 'relational techniques of the self' and 'micropolitics' (Connolly 2002b, 20–1). Relational techniques of the self are those

choreographed mixtures of word, gesture, image, sound, rhythm, smell and touch that help to define the sensibility in which your perception, thinking, identity, beliefs, and judgment are set. (Connolly 2002b, 20)

Micropolitics refers to

such techniques organized and deployed collectively by professional associations, mass-media talk shows, TV and film dramas, military training, work processes, neighborhood gangs, church meetings, school assemblies, sports events, charitable organizations, commercial advertising, child rearing, judicial practice, and police routines. (Connolly 2002b, 20–1)

If the relational techniques are the means through which artful selves tactically work on themselves, then micropolitical practices regularly impinge upon these practices of ethical and associational



becoming; arts of the self and micropolitics are 'two sides of the same coin' (Connolly 1999, 149). They are the stuff out of which selves work on themselves, more or less attentively.

Connolly constructs a model of micropolitics in which 'the political' remains firmly tethered to determinant moments of decision, such as winning elections, handing down court judgements or passing legislation:

Consider some macropolitical proposals: 'Let's allow gays in the military'. 'Let's allow individuals the right to doctor assisted suicide'. 'Let's get rid of the property tax and give everybody an equal education'. 'Let's save the rain forests in North America'. None of these proposals, enunciated by a court, a parliament, or executive decree, is either likely to be made or get very far unless and until micropolitical receptivity to it has been nurtured across several registers and constituencies. (Connolly 1999, 149)

Connolly's account of micropolitics presents a tightly mediated view of the relationship between formal politics and a diffuse set of cultural practices. This tendency has been heightened in Connolly's most recent work on neuropolitics.

Connolly's (2002b) neuropolitics of affect relies on a selective reading of the literature on neuroscience by writers such as Varela (1999) and Damasio (2000).<sup>1</sup> Connolly derives an ontological principle from this scientific field, which is understood to reveal 'how much of perception and judgment is prior to consciousness' (Connolly 2005b, 73). Connolly interprets this scientific field as providing a causal model of the emergent relationship between micropolitical interventions and macropolitical outcomes. In so doing, he supposes that certain philosophical problems can be cleared up if and when 'science' develops the proper understanding of the human brain (cf. Rée 2004; Descombes 2001). One gets little sense from Connolly's account that neuroscience is a contested field, nor much acknowledgement that the implications of this field for political theory and moral philosophy are far from cut-and-dried (e.g. Bennett *et al.* 2007; Churchland 2006; Habermas 2007; Rorty 2004; Searle 2006).

Developing a political diagnosis of the present conjuncture on the basis of an ontologised interpretation of neuroscience is associated with the reduction of 'the media' to a mere medium, understood as a means to an end that can supposedly be grasped independently of the specificities of the medium as such. In Connolly's (2002b) recent account of

neuropolitics, micropolitics is quite literally big-P Politics writ small. It is the means through which the agendas of 'Political politics' become inscribed in the recesses of the sub-cortical zones of the brain:

Micropolitics in and around the dinner table, the church, the movie theater, the union hall, the TV sitcom and talk show, the film, the classroom, and the local meeting set the table for macro-policy initiatives in these domains by rendering large segments of the public receptive or unreceptive to them. (Connolly 2002a, 3)

On Connolly's account, the paradigmatic mediums for this micropolitical priming of receptive subjects are the techniques of cinematic representation and the dark arts of political campaign advertising on television. Classical media-effects research is often criticised for assuming a hypodermic model of media power, ascribing to 'the media' the ability to inject their preferred messages into the minds of their audiences. Connolly goes one better than this: his account of media-affects is meant almost literally as a hypodermic model of influence, with media technologies ascribed remarkable determinative power in infusing affective dispositions under the skin of their audiences.

Connolly's account of the politics of affect relies on a very specific ontology of Film. Film serves as his paradigm of cultural practice in general, for understanding how artistry and technique are configured in a world of omnipotent and ubiquitous screens to organise perception and consolidate habits. By translating neuroscience into an ontology of political affects via a specific style of Film analysis, Connolly constructs a conceptual-methodological mechanism of affective interpellation. Echoing another classical problem of media research, this allows the critic to substitute their own analysis of the imputed effects/affects of Film or campaign advertisements for any substantive analysis of the practices in which these sound-images are embedded. Connolly's reading of Film adopts a Deleuzian methodology, focusing primarily on 'technique' rather than 'symbolic interpretation' to explain the relationship between politics and film (Connolly 2002a). Interpretative approaches to visual media always generate the conceptual and methodological problem of how and whether image-sound assemblages actually affect audiences in the ways intended. Connolly's combination of Deleuzian Film theory and neuroscience generates no such

problem, precisely because the extra-disciplinary appeal to science seems to provide a cast-iron account of how 'the media' engineer outcomes by circumventing interpretative layers of action completely. The same move is evident in Thrift's media ontology, which presents affect as working through a generalised power of automatism: 'the body is the medium for the transmission of force but without any conscious volition' (2007, 241). This understanding of affect working to make various dispositions automatic allows Thrift to imply that empirical evidence showing that the subjects of mediascapes are not completely credulous actually confirms that, in fact, at a deeper level they are. After all, the effectiveness of affective technologies lies in instilling the feeling that subjects are agents of free will and volition by implanting this feeling in 'a substrate of the will which is not conscious' (2007, 246).

In Connolly's theory of affective media spaces, a claim about the ontological *layering* of affect beneath consciousness is combined with a claim about *priority* to present media practices as highly influential mediums for the micropolitical priming of political agency. Connolly uses the example of the persistent charge levelled against John Kerry in the 2004 US Presidential election, that he was prone to 'flip-flops' on key issues, to claim that media affects are the key technologies mediating between the micro and macro levels of contemporary politics. The flip-flop charge was, Connolly suggests, 'planted' in the minds of the electorate early on in the 2004 campaign, during the Primary season, before Kerry was installed as the Democratic candidate and before people were explicitly 'tuned in' to the Presidential campaign:

They were distracted, thus primed to receive subliminal messages. It was renewed later, after being installed in the lower psyches of many voters as a fact as if they had discerned it themselves. (Connolly 2005b, 9)

Connolly initially invokes a straightforwardly chronological sense of temporal order: a theme 'planted' at some earlier date is 'renewed' at a subsequent one. This chronological ordering is then collapsed into a stronger claim about the priority of layered embodied-affective dispositions over explicit representational reasoning in generating calculable electoral outcomes. His claim is that the pinning of the 'flip-flop' charge to Kerry helps us 'to discern how media presentations do much of their work below the level of explicit attention' (Connolly 2005c,

880). Here, in contrast to the chronological ordering identified above, the order of priority being claimed refers to a distinction between explicit and implicit attention. Connolly is careful to say that media do not simply manipulate people's feelings. But the force of this disavowal is somewhat undermined by his clarification that the media do predispose people to accept certain messages (2005c, 880). It remains unclear whether the point of the analysis of neurologically mediated micropolitics is to claim that affective technologies are good at mobilising people to act in ways they are already predisposed toward, or at actually shaping those predispositions in the first place and then mobilising them at election time. Connolly's discussion of the low-down-and-dirty campaigning against Kerry is meant to illustrate the affective effectiveness of election campaign advertising. The implication is that the flip-flop charge put people off voting for Kerry, but this claim is not empirically substantiated in his analysis.

There are good reasons to doubt whether the analysis of Film can bear the diagnostic weight ascribed to it in Connolly's political ontology of media affects. The idea that the analysis of Film discloses invariant features of technique shared by other visual media overlooks the quite distinctive ontological features that differentiate film from, for example, television (see Cavell 1982). Connolly shows little concern for the practices in which the image-sound assemblages of film or television spots are enacted. The determinative power ascribed to Film technique in shaping visceral dispositions depends on making a great deal out of the observation that Film plays to 'captive audiences in darkened rooms' (Connolly 2002a, 25). Connolly's account of affected individuals being predisposed to favour particular political slates over others presents these individuals as essentially isolated monads, watching TV or films in silence, glued to the screen. Conflating different mediums, Connolly claims that

the TV and film viewer is immobilized before a moving image and sound track, while the everyday perceiver is either mobile or one step removed from mobility. The position of immobility amplifies the affective intensities received. (2005c, 880)

This emphasis on the immobility of the viewer underplays the degree to which, in contrast to the clear emplacement of film viewers in front of projected film images, the phenomenology of electronic media like television redistributes the

subject of television into the distanced spaces of mediation itself (Weber 1996). The distinctive ontology of television means that, in this medium, it is 'the powerful' who are obliged to attune themselves to the affective modalities of presentation inherent in the phenomenology of these spaces, or risk suffering the consequences (Berlant 2005b; Scannell 1995).

Like Thrift's spatial politics of affect, Connolly's critical account of the geopolitics of affect presents 'the media' as an instrumental medium for doing groundwork on the political dispositions of massified subjects. These dispositions are subsequently re-energised for macropolitical mobilisation. This argument is attached to a neuro-ontology centred on a rhetorical construction of the pre-cognitive visceral priming of subjects' feelings and emotions. The combination of appeals to scientific authority and ontological claims of *layering* and *priority* reduces the question of 'the political' to a consideration of the ways in which various technologies enable monadic preceptors to be assembled into blocks of more or less willing, more or less recalcitrant voters or consumers.

The last two sections have identified how a rhetoric of manipulation insinuates itself into the critical account of the politics of affect. This is in part an effect of the adoption of a layer-cake model of the relationship between affect and rationality. The next section explores how this presentation of affect as a medium of manipulation rebounds on the attempt to present an affirmative account of the politics of affect.

## Affecting politics

Connolly's account of the politics of affect is unashamedly partisan, concerned with how the progressive Left can learn to be as good at the arts of collectively mobilising affect as the Right has been (Connolly 2005b). But the critical account of affect makes it difficult to avoid a sense that politics is all about interventions that go on below the threshold of explicit articulation, and this clearly presents a problem for any critically inclined left-liberal academic. Affect is ascribed political significance because it is the medium for efforts at priming subjects to act in more or less malign, hateful, hopeful, generous or benign ways. Progressive politics is now understood as a form of experiment (Connolly 2006), which has a nice open-ended ring to it. But such experimenting actually involves the

'application of techniques' to populations with the aim of prompting new modes of responsiveness. Connolly himself recognises that seen like this, as what he calls 'tactical work on dispositions installed below consciousness' (2002b, 82), the affective-experimental view of politics might have a somewhat less nice ring to it. Viewing politics as a sub-cortical machine carries with it, he acknowledges, the danger of 'becoming an envoy of cultural manipulation' (2006, 74). To ward off this danger, he recommends that the Left adopt a 'three-tiered strategy':

you expose the tactics of those who do not themselves call attention to them; you introduce counterstrategies of cultural-corporeal infusion attached to a more generous vision of public life; and you publicize, as you proceed, how these counterstrategies themselves impinge upon the affectively rich, nonconscious layers of life. (2006, 74)

There are two points worth making about this proposal. First, it seems to carry the very high probability of being self-defeating as a strategy for mobilising affective registers that are supposed to work without making themselves knowable. Second, this ethic of publicly reflexive disclosure invokes a norm of rationalising legitimacy that seems to run counter to the tenor of the ontological argument by which we arrived at this dilemma in the first place. This is a recurrent feature of political ontologies of affect. It is here that political ontologies of affect lay themselves open to the charge of *cryptonormativism*: in order to elaborate on the political relevance of their claims, they implicitly invoke the persuasive force of norms that theorists of affect are unwilling to openly avow, and which their own theories seem to undermine (Anderson A 2006).

Like Connolly, Thrift also presents an affirmative account of the progressive political experiments on affect which 'might legitimately be made' (2004a, 58). The positive politics of credence is presented as a form of cultural work on dispositions and habits. This is couched in the same instrumentalist rhetoric as the critical account. Progressive politics is now understood as a means of experimenting on affective dispositions embedded in everyday spaces, undertaken with the aim of 'maneuvering minoritarian formations in from the margins of the concerns of conventional political bodies' (Thrift 2006, 561).

Connolly's concern about being seen as an envoy of manipulation and Thrift's passing reference to legitimacy are traces of a road not taken in this

style of ontologised theory. The theoretical resources drawn on by political ontologies of affect affirm finitude as the very condition of voluntary action. One might therefore expect the affect onto-story – a story derived from various phenomenological accounts of ready-at-handedness, background, throwness and bolstered by the somewhat selective invocation of the authority of the life sciences – to fundamentally shift the terms in which democratic legitimacy can be thought. The second section of this paper has already indicated some of the diverse literature that undertakes to start this task. However, the political ontologies of affect considered here tend to fall back on some quite conventional images of legitimacy to articulate their critical perspective on contemporary politics, without ever avowing the values that this appeal entrains.

The political frisson of the ontologisation of affect is made to depend on a conflation of a universal hypothesis about the necessary backgrounding of conditions of intentional action with a specific claim that ‘power’ is naturalised directly into bodily comportments and habits of feeling that elude the workings of consciousness. For example, there is a slippage between the claim that affect as a general feature of life ‘is a semiconscious phenomenon, consisting of a series of automatisms’ (Thrift 2007, 239), and the rhetorical account of how political feeling is increasingly engineered by embedding various automatisms into everyday life. If the former claim holds, then it is not clear why finding examples of such automatism in everyday life is, on its own, cause for any concern at all. However, programmatic statements about the politics of affect tend to fall back on an implicit claim that any external determination of action is *a priori* suspect. The implicit norm invoked in accounts of the micropolitical, mass-mediated manipulation of predispositions is certainly a noble one: people are unfree as far as their actions are directed by someone else’s intentions to do things they might not have voluntarily chosen to do, thus hindering their own potential for flourishing. If the engineering of affect is ‘producing new forms of power’ (Thrift 2004b, 68), then these are meant to worry us because they work behind our backs, without us knowing it. In short, they should worry us because they are leading to the danger ‘that very large amounts of political thinking will be automated’ (Amin and Thrift 2005, 229).

The imperative behind Thrift’s account of the spatial politics of affect

is the growing realization that there are landscapes of space, time and experience that have been ceded too readily to powerful naturalizing forces which erase the prospect of political action even before it starts by producing *backgrounds*. (2007, 19)

These backgrounds ‘make certain aspects of the events we constantly come across not so much hard to question as hard to even think of as containing questions at all’ (2007, 19). Backgrounding here takes on the character of a political strategy in its own right, rather than a general condition of intentional action, and is made to seem suspect on the grounds that it depoliticises certain aspects of action by making sure they are not even noticed. What raises one’s doubts about this account of ‘the political’ is not just that the grounds for this evaluation are not spelt out. It is the feeling that the implicit norm appealed to might actually be undermined by the tradition of thought which serves as the ontological foundation for the critical account.

The persuasive force of both the critical and affirmative accounts of the politics of affect seems to turn on the sense that something important is at stake in submitting to and embracing specific affective regimes:

For it is quite clear that there are enormous emotional costs and benefits for individuals and groups in being shaped by particular institutions in particular ways. However, it is often quite difficult to show what is at stake for the individuals or groups in submitting to such institutions and embracing certain affective styles that render them deferential, obedient or humble – or independent, aggressive and arrogant. (Thrift 2004b, 69)

This acknowledgement seems to present an occasion to enter into an argument about how and why certain sorts of submission, to certain sorts of affective regimes, may or may not be justifiable, legitimate, or malign and unjust. It is here, in other words, that one might expect the intuition behind the ‘quite clear’ to be worked up into an effort to ‘show’ what is at stake. But no such argument or demonstration is forthcoming. Perhaps this is due to a residual sense that to articulate a justificatory argument would somehow do an injustice to the integrity of visceral feeling out of which ‘protopolitical longings for change’ (Thrift 2004b, 69) initially emerge. The notion that rationality – asking for and giving reasons – might be put to good effect in the service of such intuitions does not seem to be countenanced. Instead, we are offered a

list of preferred ethical stances which, in the absence of any argument as to why these are to be the preferred virtues of personal conduct, are recommended to us primarily on the grounds that they are the best way of cultivating a certain sort of open, creative, experimental, hopeful character (2004b, 68).

Connolly's intellectual project for a decade or more has explicitly concerned itself with the elaboration of a fully-fledged ethos of democratic pluralisation (Connolly 1995 1999 2005a). This ethos is elaborated as a process of self-expressive agonistic confrontation and enlarged generosity. This is an ethos of flourishing critical responsiveness (1995, xv–xix), one that aims to proliferate the forms in which pluralism is democratically negotiated, and to multiply the sources of incorrigible values that generate pluralistic contestation. The elaboration of an ethos of engagement (1999, 137–61) indicates that the layered understanding of mind and body, habit and reflection in the affect onto-story is not wholly at odds with approaches that focus on deliberative reason. The development of accounts of the ethos of democracy follows from the acknowledgement that citizen's affective attachments to diverse conceptions of the good is an irreducible feature of public life that cannot be contained by neutral procedures (Krause 2004). Accounts of democratic ethos are presented as figures for alternative regulative practices that might help reproduce fidelity to democratic principles.

The ethos of engagement, like other accounts of democratic ethos, therefore fills a procedural-shaped hole in normative democratic theory. It augments and displaces Habermasian consensualism and Rawlsian overlapping consensus with a more fecund image of democratic culture (Connolly 1999, 35–6, 70). And yet, while there is a promise that the political ontology of affective neuropolitics can provide a 'modification' to those sorts of democratic theories (Connolly 2002b, 36), Connolly has had nothing to say 'about affect within specific processes of evaluative judgement', and even less to say about 'what normative models of political judgment and democratic deliberation would look like after an appropriate affective inflection' (Krause 2007, 2; see also Krause 2006).

The ontologising of affect, and the recourse to the rhetoric of ethos, might in fact militate against any such modification. The ontologisation of affect expels affect from the space of reasons by drawing too sharp a distinction between different layers of perception and action that are assumed to be

related in an order of conceptual priority. The recourse to ethos-talk marks a choice to deploy a genre that allows one to register a commitment to certain values without having to directly avow norms and principles or present arguments in favour of them (Anderson A 2006, 137). The question that remains, however, is whether the content of ontologies that disclose the aspects of action that are pre-conscious and dispositional rather than highly reflective justifies the eschewing of reasons at the level of theoretical exposition.

The eschewing of reasons might also betray an unacknowledged parochialism in these ontologies of affect. Affectively enhanced onto-stories actively embrace as a virtue rather than a vice the recurring difficulty that characterises deliberative accounts of democratic pluralism: have in not being able to outline neutral procedures for negotiating across difference without positing a particular substantive conception of the good life. Eschewing reason-giving in favour of the enactment of affectively infused figures of democratic ethos therefore openly courts the possibility of universalising culturally specific norms. Only now, the universalisation is not of rationalist norms of deliberative argumentation, but of affectively sedimented models of good character and public virtue, such as generosity and responsibility. And this runs the risk of prejudging the sorts of harm and injustice to which the emergence of democratic politics is a situational response (see Dryzek 2005).

In short, we can see that the ontology of affect stands as a *reason* to favour an affective ethos of democratic pluralisation that promises a less strenuous and more open account of the cultural conditions of democratic politics. But in enacting this commitment, it opens the space for a demand that some justification at least be offered for the preference accorded to the particular virtues espoused by this ethos.

### Placing affect in the space of reasons

Both Thrift's ontology of spatial affects and Connolly's ontology of media affects ask us to worry about the political implications of the designed, engineered, automated qualities of contemporary spaces of public interaction. But they do so without specifying any reasons why, or when, we should worry. This work challenges the rationalist pieties of democratic theory, and even points out the inadvertent sources of harm and injustice that might inhabit these

theories. However, these ontologised accounts of affective politics are characterised by an ambivalence that also gives us pause for thought and reflection. This is ambivalence between claiming that any and all subjective apprehension of the self relies on a background of affective dispositions, and a politically inflected claim that the manipulation of these background conditions in particular situations carries with it a normatively charged threat of harm or injustice, in the form of involuntary submission to the will of others. What remains unexplored is how and when one might tell the difference between these two aspects of life, or even what reconfigured understanding of criteria might help in this task.

Two related questions are provoked by the ontologised, instrumental interpretation of the political work that 'affect' does, not so much behind people's backs as under their skins.

First, in the *critical vision of the politics of affect*, affect matters politically because it opens up new surfaces for the exercise of manipulation. This leaves aside the question of the circumstances in which being 'manipulated' is a bad thing, politically or ethically. Excitement, joy, hope, love, surprise, distress, anguish, fear, terror, anxiety, obsession, compulsion, shame, hatred, humiliation, contempt, disgust, anger and rage have no *a priori* political valence at all. This depends on what it is they are mobilised around or attached to. Manipulating affective dispositions around some topics or objects might not always be meaningfully described as political. Knowing whether it should be depends on a willingness to take seriously how those affected interpret the issue at hand.

Second, in the *affirmative vision of the politics of affect*, ontologies of affect are presented as the basis of new models of progressive politics, in which politics is understood as a means of intervening in affective regimes to bring about new configurations of feeling. This leaves aside the question of why the type of academic-artistic experiments that writers such as Thrift and Connolly recommend count as 'progressive', or even minimally 'legitimate'. Their value as progressive seems to follow solely from the ends to which these interventions are oriented – furthering emotional liberty, or cultivating a generous ethos of engagement. Their value as legitimate remains unclear, not least because no effort is made to clarify what practical implications the ontology of affect has for the simple democratic principle according to which those affected by actions

should have some role in defining the parameters of those actions.

There are a range of registers available for acknowledging the affective aspects of political life. Acknowledgement of the affective aspects of life can serve as an important warning against an excessively rationalist faith in the power of argument to resolve disputes. And it should lead us to embrace with a passion the faith that what we have left after rationalistic rationality is more argument, the game of giving of and asking for reasons without end.

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## Note

- 1 See Papoulias and Callard (2007) for a detailed critical consideration of the politics at work in the inter-disciplinary appropriation of scientific authority in cultural theory's turn to affect.

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